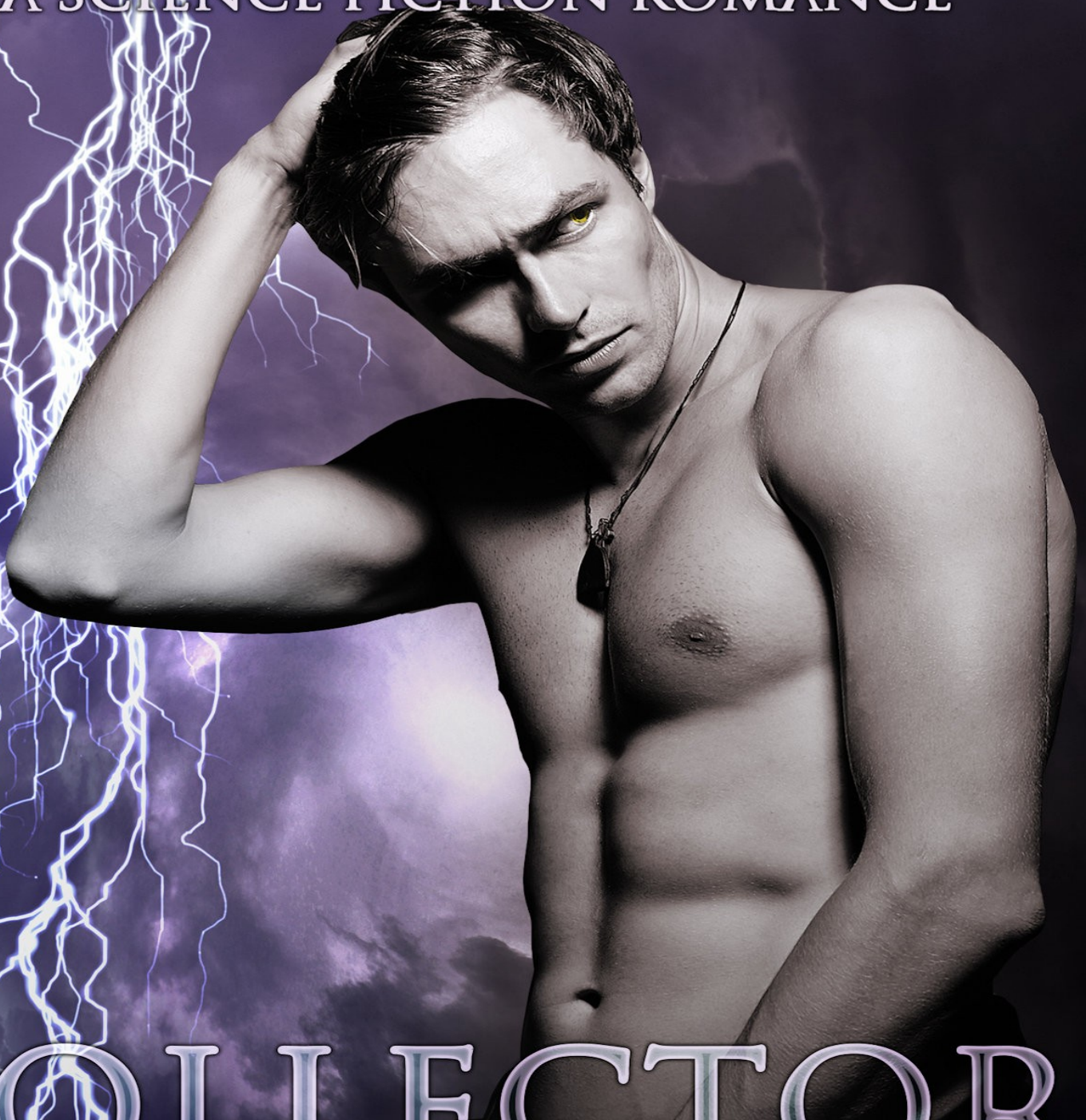


A SCIENCE FICTION ROMANCE



# COLLECTOR OF SOULS

STRANDED IN THE STARS  
BOOK II

NAOMI LUCAS

# **COLLECTOR OF SOULS**

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STRANDED IN THE STARS #2

NAOMI LUCAS

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Cover Art by Cameron Kamenicky

Editing by Lindsay York at LY Publishing Services

✿ Created with Vellum

*This book is dedicated to my dearest friends– J. Magnuson  
and Cameron Kamenicky. Thank you for being a part of my  
life. It would be a dull one without you.*

Ophelia ran.

Every fiber of her being screamed in agony. That agony wasn't from the exertion of her straining movements but from the brutality of recent events. If she could run far enough, for long enough, she could outrun the horrors directly behind her. She could outrun the piercing pain between her legs, the vulnerability and betrayal she felt. Still felt.

The overwhelming disappointment that had quickly become horrendous struggles and screams.

If she could run far enough, it could be buried in her past. But it was so miserably a part of her present that no amount of movement was going to make it go away.

She could still feel rough hands holding her down, biting into her skin, where minutes before they had been removed and clinical. The calluses of those hands, a sharp contrast to her soft skin, rubbing it raw like bark.

Ophelia diverged from the dirt path and entered the darkening forest. The sun was setting directly behind her, casting a bloody twilight across the landscape. The sound of pursuers was long gone. They had given up long ago but she still felt them right behind her.

The torn sheath of a dress fluttered behind her as she ran deeper into the woods. The trees around her scraped at her skin as she flung her body through the low hanging branches; the bushes snagged the flimsy cloth of her dress, further ripping the material's hem.

*What did I do that made me unworthy of being fertile?* She sobbed.

The doctors—the priests of her colony—had initiated the ritual of her womanhood mere hours ago. She had reached an age where her protectors could no longer ensure her safety, especially with the possibility that she may be fertile. It was a good possibility, too, as her mother was Earthian and had brought forth several children.

*I was supposed to bring forth children.*

Her protectors, the barren women who managed the traveling orphanages, released guardianship of her as the ritual commenced and delivered her to the temple of their gods. If she was deemed fertile, Ophelia would have been transported to one of their colony's communes, and if she were deemed barren, she would have been left to fend for herself—thrown to the wolves—of her feudal world.

The morning brought dread and excitement and it had overpowered her psyche. It had been her dream to rise in the ranks of the Warlord's regime and to be paired off with a great warrior, to bring strong children into this world. *That* was the world she had been raised in, always aware of the power that she could have but also of the danger.

If she was fertile, she would become a treasure, a *prize*. She could be kidnapped or held against her will, hurt, or even killed. But if the laws of the land protected her with the strong fist of the Warlord's might, she would have been powerful and protected.

Breeders were rare.

On the other hand, if she was found to be barren, Ophelia would have no rights, no protection, and would be left to fend for herself. She could still be hurt, kept against



her will, or even killed, but no one would care or come to her aid.

She would just be another mouth, and in such a blood-possessed colony where resources were limited, science and technology had come to a screeching halt; the constant harvest of diseased, inedible crops, there were very few professions she could do to take care of herself.

She may have found a husband, like some of the barren women did, but she would only have the protection of a man who was not a warrior and would not be able to protect her like a warrior could.

And a hybrid like herself would not go unnoticed by the men.

The thought of becoming a concubine, blindingly aware of the stabbing pain between her legs, made her gut wrench. *I will never give myself to a man now.*

Ophelia gasped, her lungs burning with the heavy weight of overexertion, ready to collapse. Her foot caught a root; it twisted her leg beneath her and sent her crashing to the ground as an ominous beat of wings sounded overhead, heralding the coming of darkness.

She looked around while the panic and adrenaline still coursed through her veins, keeping her going. The need to outrun the priests had been her sole motivation, but now that the day was fading into eventide she needed a new goal.

Her time in the light was coming to an end and the dense forest was impenetrable at night. *I need to find shelter—a place to hide.*

Lost time could never be restored.

Dragging her body over the bristly ground, her hands sunk into the moist, slippery soil as she bore herself forward. The dirt and mud drenched her thin, torn dress, and it left her cold and shivering.

She crawled on all fours deeper into the gloom, hyperaware of every sound around her. The crunch of



leaves under her knees, the beat of wings high above her head, the distant howl of an animal. Ophelia's ears twitched with every noise as she focused on discerning any sound of pursuers, whether it was male voices or the tell-tale broken twig.

*Why have I become nothing? I'm a blight, a bad seed, and now a lost innocent. They were so sure I would be sent to the female commune but now I'm nothing.* Her fingers clawed at her chest.

Ophelia misread the terrain and tumbled over a hidden ledge, rolling down a steep incline until her fall was broken with a painful crack. Her body pressed against a long, rough root sticking out of the ground.

Moaning, she curled herself into a fetal position to ride out terrible waves of pain. Her eyes clenched tight with shock as she took inventory of her form; her shaking hand felt around and located a dull protrusion over her ribs and, as Ophelia explored the break, the sharp bone punctured her skin. Her hand fell away, bloody. She battled roils of torment and was dragged into unconsciousness.

It wasn't until the last golden ray of light flashed and lit up behind her eyelids that she lifted her gaze to her new surroundings.

A giant, gnarled tree loomed before her like a monstrous obstruction.

It was shaded by the fading light that crested in a ruby halo around its form. She had to hood her eyes to see it clearly as a distorted shadow towered out toward her, growing longer every second. The wispy darkness of it clawed its way over the sodden ground, and she knew she would be engulfed by it at any moment.

Giant, lumbering roots burst from the thick trunk and spread out in every direction; Ophelia's small, broken form was plastered against one.

The tree looked like a nightmare and she was equal parts intrigued and awed by its wild beauty. When she

began to catch her breath, she could smell a rich, terra musk.

*I'm so ugly. I would do anything to be that dark and beautiful.* She wiped the back of her hand across her cheek.

Ophelia felt compelled to crawl closer to the trunk, maneuvering her way through the large, winding roots, *wanting* to get closer to it. When she was at the innermost apex, she leaned her bruised back into the rigid bark and pulled her legs up to her body.

The tree provided protection but it did not provide warmth.

As her heart rate slowed and her breathing eased, the pain and memories of her torn, beaten innocence came back in full force. She willed it to go away with all her might and focused on what was before her now.

That she was cold and raw, a husk of the girl she had been just hours before, but she was alive, alone, and away from her abusers.

Blood flooded down from between her legs to pool and soak into the moist dirt below. She could feel the sanguine leave her as every new gush was another piece of her innocence gone. *My blood is dirty. I want it gone.* She wrapped her arms around herself and shook.

The priests had held her down and took turns with her body as she screamed and sobbed to no avail. The decrepit old men were eerily unconcerned with her pain, and drowned out her cries with grunts of their own .

She hated them. If she had the chance or the ability, she would avenge herself and kill them all. *To hell with the Xanteaus and gods of this world.* The tree was her only god now.

Ophelia was overcome with rage, with her pain, and with the despair of being utterly alone.

*I want to kill them, all of them. I want to rip their innocence away like they ripped mine. I want my hands to be dripping with their blood as I bathe in their screams.*

A dark, hellish stream of thoughts bombarded her mind. They took her breath away and filled her with fire. The shadows of the gnarled branches above her cast a blood-black shadow over her form, hiding her from the light.

*I would do anything to have the life I was promised.*

*I would sell my soul.*

She felt an abrupt shift in the air. The evening chill pulsed away from her as a numbing sensation descended in its place. She was left alone with her frenetic emotions as the void around her grew heavier. The sounds of the forest faded away.

Ophelia closed her eyes tightly and wished—

*Please. If you can hear me, any deity, any god that will listen. Please answer my wish. I have lost everything and I want it back. BACK.*

“Are you sure you want it back?” a deep, hissed voice came from the darkness before her.

She opened her eyes in shock and stared into the black nothingness, trying to locate the source of the strange voice. Had something answered?

“Who’s there?” she called weakly, her throat sore from earlier events.

“The one you wished for.”

Her mouth parted and she licked her lips, trying to understand the significance of the answer. “You heard me? How is that possible?” she rasped dryly. The shadows before her were thick and impenetrable.

“You wished for me. And now I’m here.” The low voice was sensuous. “Unless you would like me to leave?”

She prickled with foreboding. The voice didn’t sound human. What deity had answered her pathetic call? “Don’t—don’t leave. Who did I summon?” she asked again.

A long quiet pause fell between her and the shadows. The entity in the forest became so silent that she thought

that it had left. Her foot sank into the mud as she swiped a damp, stray strand of her hair off her face and sat forward.

A deep, stabbing pain shot through her weakening body. It coursed from between her legs to the tips of her fingers—to the end of her toes.

“You’re dying.” The mysterious man hummed.

She couldn’t see clearly anymore. The rays of the setting sun had dissipated; her only source of light now was from the silvery moonbeams of the stars. They morphed the scarlet glen into a dimming silver-bullet grey. It was then she noticed the black pool of blood spreading around her body.

*I’m bleeding out* . The entity had diagnosed her imminent death.

“Can you save me?” She croaked softly. *Do I want to be saved?* Now that she knew she was on the precipice of death, Ophelia felt a heavy pressure ease from her soul. She never realized how life itself could bear down so strongly that the gateway of death would be welcomed with its lightened load.

The shivers that ran down her spine were ones of anxiety rather than cold. *The deity will either save me or I will die.* Either option was better than continuing on in the broken existence she was currently treading.

“I can.”

“How?”

“We make a trade.” It answered softly. The voice had a hint of eagerness.

“What do we trade?” Ophelia knew. Deep down, she knew, but needed to hear it.

“Your soul,” the dark voice stated with a stern finality.

Thoughts raced through her mind. She was weak and lightheaded from the blood loss. Could insanity be a part of death? She had run long and far, fleeing from the monsters that chased her, but she never thought that running from

them would lead her right into the clutches of another, more sinister being. *Is my mind as broken as my body?*

Her thoughts were so painfully lucid. She couldn't be going crazy.

"You're not crazy," the entity answered her as if it read her mind.

A wave of dizziness enveloped her. Her body twitched with electric jerks as she hunched over and clutched her head, forcing her mind to ground itself. The world spun around her as a death-like weakness gripped her body.

Ophelia could feel the cold hands of the reaper caress her dirty skin. She weakly looked up with her waning strength and addressed the darkness.

"If I give you my soul..." she trailed off as she briefly lost her train of thought. "You would give me back my innocence?" She swallowed, "My life? You would make me fertile?"

"Yes," it answered quickly.

"Why?" she asked in disbelief, wondering how her soul could be worth so much.

"Power."

*Power?*

"Who are you?" Her arms curled around her knees as she watched the forest line, looking for the entity.

Once again silence descended in the vale. She knew her time was coming to an end as her face grew heavy, and her muscles twitched with weakness as the world around her started to fade to grey. Right as she began to close her lids and succumb to oblivion, a slight movement caught her eye.

She conjured enough willpower to lift her eyelids for the figure beyond her sight. Ophelia wanted to see the deity that had answered her call, if it was the last thing that would occur in her life.

Shadows oozed from the wood like muddy water slipping across silk, and solidified into a tall figure at the tree-line. The gloom fell into wavering yet lucid shapes until it formed

into the figure of a man. He wore the darkness like a cloak around his form and made the twilight look like day with how bleak he was.

The man's face was hidden behind an aura of obscurity; the only feature she could discern was the mischievous sparkle of his hooded yellow eyes.

Was she really considering giving her soul in exchange for getting everything she wanted? Deserved?

Yes.

As if he read her thoughts, the mysterious being stepped forward. He made no sound beyond the dull thump and crunch of his steps. She hadn't realized that she was holding her breath until he stopped to tower over her huddled form.

"What will you do with me?" She asked softly, frightened of the unknown presence and yet strangely intrigued.

"Nothing." He paused, his voice deep. "When you die, I will collect payment. Until then, I will grant your requests and then I will leave."

"But... my soul?"

"Will be mine. To do with as I please for the rest of eternity."

A shiver of doubt tugged at her. She couldn't quite believe that this was anything more than a bad dream. Could she surrender eternity? Her mind grew weak at the thought, and her remaining strength bled out to join her lost innocence in the soil.

The dark figure crouched before her and peered into her eyes. The shade around his face lifted away to reveal an unholy visage. Her mouth parted in disbelief.

*He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.*

Mesmerized, Ophelia leaned toward him involuntarily.

"Shall we seal the deal with a kiss?" He asked as he lifted his hand to stroke her tear-stained cheek. His fingers were warm to the touch.

"Yes." She breathed. *I would sell my soul to kiss you.*

He dazzled her with an indulgent smile. Blazing hands cupped her neck as his thumbs tilted up her chin. He leaned forward to place a soft, chaste kiss upon her pale lips. The touch electrified her senses.

The feel of his mouth over hers was the last thing Ophelia remembered before she slipped into a dreamless, void-like sleep.



Seraph was stone incarnate, a gargoyle, a sentinel of time, and had been for several decades when he felt an itch at the tip of his finger.

He sat on his throne of petrified wood, made from the ancient forest of Lesbos, Greece. What was dead well before the space age was now no more than dust buried deep beneath a metal metropolis. A metropolis that covered the coasts of the Mediterranean.

He no longer knew Earth.

He could have had a throne made of precious metal, star cinders, or rose petals, but he was partial to the wood. It was an extension of his being. His seat in the ether was as alive once as they were both dead now.

Seraph laughed. *If there was dust, my body would be coated in it. If there were spiders, webbing would blanket me.* But there was nothing. Only his quiet realm that was illuminated by a single, endless soul lantern.

The only sound that permeated his space was the occasional distant howl, lost outside the walls of his plane, deep within the inky mist. Sometimes he howled back to fill the silence.

He had eternity at his hands as long as he stayed within the ether. His power and his existence would be preserved

forever in this unending fog.

Seraph's brethren, his enemies as well as his friends, were with him behind the closed doors of their domains. Only time knew what they were up to. He liked to think they all sat on their thrones, like him, lost in an ocean of thoughts.

*Collecting imaginary dust like me.*

The last time he roused was during the human war, when the souls that poured into the dark netherworld became an endless stream, an ongoing torrent of energy. The wails from beyond had been constant music to his ears. The souls found their place in the mist after a time and the cascade of cries had faded into a low hum; the pearly orbs trickled to a drip.

Seraph remembered the sullen silence after the war as a welcomed friend.

His jaw ticked as a foreign sensation tapped at his subconscious.

Many humans had died, and after a while, strange colored souls began to appear within the pour. They enticed the '*old-ones*' out to investigate. It was then that he joined his colleagues to crack open the mystery.

An alien species had joined their ranks. The mysticism of the Earthians had seeped into this new people and infected them with the sticky strings of their doctrines, their ether. Some of the new souls were mixed and swirled, half-Earthian, half-alien, and some were entirely alien. Their souls were a paler, beautiful blush compared to those of the silvery humans.

For the denizens of the neutral buffer, the residents of the eternal ether, it was an awe-inspiring sight.

The people from Earth had encountered this new species and warred with them, for many years, until they united and created a sub-species; it was the souls of these half-breeds that had the most mesmerizing facade.

A beautiful swirl of rose and chrome, like a sphere of multi-layered lights that emitted a glow that fought off the mists of the ether, yet soothed them at the same time. And that bright luminescence held off the darkness and lightened the paths through the void.

Seraph had held one for a brief moment before it slipped away from him in fear.

He wanted one, and he knew it from the foundation of his being that he would possess one. It had been his constant fixation since that convergence. An unfamiliar tug pulled at his heart when he thought of that moment, that destiny was in his grasp.

*It took my breath away.* It was a wondrous revelation to his boring, immortal afterlife.

The problem he had was that he could not influence the physical realm unless he was invited, and he was no longer invited because the humans, the new souls, had forgotten the ancient ways.

*I'm a self-proclaimed Soul Collector* - who had no more souls left to collect. He sighed and settled into his worn throne.

In his prime, he had many. Enough to fuel the power he had to this day and join the other Soul Collectors in their ranks. Now and again another collector would emerge, weak compared to the ancient ones.

They would play their role for a short time before moving on, back into the mists of the ether to find their unending purpose.

They did not have the foundation of primitive beliefs to fuel their power as their soul had been born during the ages of science, space, and intergalactic travel. Humans rarely summoned them now that their world was ruled by technology.

*No.* No more collectors would stay. Seraph firmly belonged to a phased-out profession.

And so he sat, and he waited, and he thought. He became an effigy subjected to the single dim lantern that loomed next to his throne. He had nothing else to do but wait. And so he did. For days, years, decades.

---

A soft, feminine cry carried through his domain. The subtle twitching of his fingertips ceased as he tightened his hand slowly into a fist. His fingers spasmed against his palm as his thumb locked them into place.

*What is that noise?*

He ground his teeth as he strained to listen, annoyed by the odd disturbance. His eyes briefly settled on the lantern by his side, ensuring that the steely light held true. Seraph loosened his hand and flexed his stiff, atrophied muscles. A loose lock of hair fell before his eye and distorted his view of the dim room. Unlike most souls that wandered here, he could see perfectly in the dark.

A whimper hissed through his head, a weak gasp pulled at his consciousness. The sounds were coming from a girl.

Someone had created a link to him.

*How interesting.*

Seraph stretched his neck, his arms, his legs, willing them to loosen up as he focused on the fleeting connection. A long forgotten, twisted feeling of vertigo shot through his head as his aura located the girl.

It had been centuries since his last summons and the sensation left an acrid, stale taste in his mouth. He was a being now who did not like to be disturbed.

A ruby forest surrounded him, the last rays of sunlight staining the foliage in crimson. The trees were unfamiliar to him but that didn't matter. He knew that mankind had left Earth to conquer the stars. It was once a feat that only the gods could achieve.

He felt a dull twinge of intrigue that he had been summoned by an individual on the outskirts of space, a girl no less. A place far from his origins.

A musical hum filled his ears— *'I would sell my soul...'*

Seraph smirked at the welcomed invitation. The girl wished for several mundane things. Human greed was the sugarcoat to his craft. Without desperate wanting, he would never have been a Soul Collector, and they never would have existed.

*'I have lost everything and I want it back.'* It was music to his ears. A husky litany.

He used the twilight haze to conceal his presence as he stepped forward to look at his summoner.

"Are you sure you want it back?" He hissed as he saw the broken girl curled up before him. Her dress in muddy tatters, caked in layers of dried blood as streams of fresh red gushed over it. The girl's skin was so pale that it glowed, devoid of that life-giving elixir.

*How is she still alive?*

Seraph had to seal the deal before her soul left her physical form and wandered into the ether. She was bleeding out fast from the wounds under her dress. It didn't take a genius to interpret what had happened to her.

The blood of a virgin offered at the roots of a tree, mixed with the chaotic, frantic mass of emotions, were always some of the strongest ingredients to calling his kind. The fact that it was the base of a tree, as ancient as he was, spoke to him alone.

*She calls for me alone.* His jaw ticked. *She is mine.*

The girl was beautiful and gullible in her waning state and at that moment, when she willed her eyes open to look up at him, he knew that he would possess her. He would have her if it was the last thing he would do. He felt an uncanny strain in his muscles, and the odd sense of... anger stab him in his dead heart.

Seraph kneeled before the declining girl and revealed his face, all while he gorged his eyes with her mortal beauty. Without his usual restraint, he stroked her waxen skin. A touch he would remember for the ages.

*'I would sell my soul to kiss you.'* Her thought flooded him.

He would sell his soul for the same thing at that moment; denying them nothing, Seraph leaned down and granted her wish.

“She’s awake! Mistress, the girl’s awake!” A young voice penetrated her clouded dreams.

“Move out of the way, girl.”

“Yes, Elder,” the excited female murmured. The sound of movement and footsteps enveloped the room.

Ophelia’s head was heavy and her eyes felt like double-tipped needles. She swam to the surface of her consciousness as the fog of her unconscious pulled her back under. *It feels like I’m swimming through thick, wet sludge.* She wanted to fall back into oblivion with the effort but her eyelids twitched when a ray of sun hit her face.

“Oh, no you don’t. Wake up, girl.” A croaked voice sounded to the left of her, “You’ve been out for days now and we can’t afford to expend the effort to continue to take care of you,” the gravel witch said. She tightened her eyelids at the sound. “That’s it, open those eyes.”

Ophelia coaxed them just a smidge to test her pupils against the airy-blue daylight. She felt a cup press to her chapped lips as cool water splashed her skin. The crone tipped the cup up and forced her to drink.

With effort, she opened her dry, pasty mouth and swallowed, allowing the invigorating essence to slide down her throat and revive her.



“Good girl.”

She gulped down every last drop and licked her chilled lips before she opened her eyes and focused on the old woman standing next to her.

“W-where am I?” Her voice broke.

“You’re at the commune, my dear,” the elderly lady said, helping her sit up.

A series of jumbled half-visions invaded her mind at the words. A blood red tree, gripping painful hands, nails that dug into her skin, and... a talking shadow with unnerving yellow eyes. Ophelia absently rubbed her thighs at the memories.

She looked up at the crone. “How did I get here?” *Was it all just a dream?*

“You fell ill during the fertility ritual,” the woman said as she shifted on the stool. “You nearly died from fever. You’ve been delirious for days.” The woman straightened her pillow up against the headboard for support.

“Thank you,” Ophelia murmured. “I’ve been ill?” The notion reassured her. A glimpse of a twilight forest came to mind before vanishing. Momentary fear gripped her heart.

*It’s just a waking nightmare then.*

“Very. You don’t remember anything? Nothing at all?” She lifted another fresh cup of water to her mouth. Ophelia drank deeply of the offering until it was gone.

“No,” she paused. “I don’t... understand. I don’t remember it.” Ophelia frowned as cloudy pain filled her mind. Cold, calculating hands probed her skin. She recoiled in disgust into her padded bed but didn’t know why. The old woman looked at her with worried curiosity.

“You were delivered to us immediately after the ritual. The priests determined that you would be able to reproduce. You’re very lucky, you... you... they found you unconscious and feverish within the temple.” She took the cup from her as she got up and turned toward the door, calling out for aid.

*I'm fertile.*

A strange, sinking feeling, mixed with relief, rocked through her. Ophelia wanted to cry for haven, for the stress that she had been harboring her entire life that had been lifted away.

But something was uncomfortably off, and she couldn't shake it.

Her eyes briefly caught the rustle of drapes at the corner window of her room before she turned back to the crone.

"I-I must have forgotten from the illness." She breathed. "I'm blessed."

"Very blessed. We're a dying breed, you know?"

Just then a girl like herself walked into the room with a small stack of towels. Another girl of similar age followed closely behind with a sloshing pail of water.

"Watch it or you'll get water all over the floor," the croaked voice grunted at a high tempo, making Ophelia wince. "Now that you're up, you need to join the others. You may limit yourself until you feel better. Lucia and Allie will help you with your constitutions." The crone hobbled slowly to the door, a noticeable limp in her gait.

"Thank you, Mistress," she called after her softly, instinctively knowing that the elderly woman was a herder to their female flock. She would guide them into womanhood and because of that, she was important enough to demand respect. Many would have perished long before they reached her age.

One of the maidens came to her side and peeled her bedding away, allowing fresh, chilled air to brush over Ophelia's pasty skin. She shivered as it dredged up a foreboding, bone-deep, and deathlike chill. A feeling she must have felt in a previous life.

*Why am I having these thoughts?* She clutched her head. *I must have been very ill to be as delirious in my dreams as when I'm awake... still.*

The girls on either side of her tugged her dress off as she lifted her arms clumsily. Her undergarments came next until they had her completely bare. She watched in silence as they lathered and bathed her skin. The feeling of cleanliness brought energy and life back to her skin.

One of the girls lifted her leg to the side and cringed. Ophelia followed her gaze to see a deep crimson stain puddle on the sheets and smears of rusty red over her thighs. The color glowed with sharp potency over her ghostly skin.

She wrenched internally at the sight and grabbed the rag out of the girl's hand, covering herself.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," she blurted shamefully, scrubbing at her legs in determined earnest. The womanly blood left her mouth dry and her heart pounding. It looked wrong and unnatural—not at all as her monthly should have been.

"It's okay," one of the maidens said gently. "You have been bleeding throughout your illness. It's been unusually strong is all, and we had hoped it would be over by now for your sake." The sweet girl tugged the rags from Ophelia's hands and dunked them into the pail of water.

Ophelia hugged her naked form and brought her legs closer, feeling uncomfortable in her nudity now. "What're your names?" She looked at her sister-mates.

The girl with the bloodied rag answered, "I'm Allie." She chirped like a swallow.

"Lucia," the other maiden to her side said blandly as she took a fresh towel and proceeded to dry her skin.

"I'm Ophelia." Lucia pulled her arms away from her form and slid a fresh cotton dress over her head. She fitted it down her body, careful not to touch the blood on the bedding. Ophelia sat away and placed her bare feet on the wooden floor. Lucia gripped her forearm and helped her to stand while Allie struggled with the soiled sheets. The pungent smell of copper drifted through the air.

When the girls were done, Lucia left with the large pile of dirty rags and bedding in her arms. Allie fiddled with her hair awkwardly but stayed behind.

"Are you well enough to go to the dining hall?" She asked.

*Good question.* Her answer came quickly as she looked around the stark, grey-stone room. The only things in it were an unmade, blood-spotted bed, several slightly rusted metallic chairs, and a small table against the opposite wall. Next to it an empty, open chest. She didn't want to stay in the lifeless room alone.

"I think so," she eventually answered.

Allie smiled meekly and turned toward the door, "Good."

The two of them walked in silence through a long dormitory until they reached a doorway that led to an outside staircase. She took her time with the uneven wood and stone steps while the other girl held an arm around her in support. Her muscles felt useless and devoid of life. She didn't trust her own body to keep her safe.

When they reached the last step, Allie sat her down on the stairs to rest. Ophelia gladly accepted the break.

"How long was I sick?"

"Nearly six sun rotations," the girl answered. She watched as the maiden continued to play with her long sable hair. The color was unusual, in fact as Ophelia peered at the girl, she realized that everything about her seemed alien.

"Are you Earthian?"

The girl smiled sadly. "Yes, both my parents were Earthlings."

"How did you end up here? No Earthians have come to this colony in many years. There are only Trents and half-breeds."

The girl fidgeted before she answered, "My mother was pregnant before she arrived at the colony." Allie sounded wistful and distant. She decided it was safer to let the

subject drop. She didn't want to upset the girl who had helped take care of her while she was sick.

"I'm a hybrid," Ophelia offered, hoping to make a connection with the alien.

Allie's smile lifted and she twirled her hair. "I know." A hint of happiness surrounded the omission. "Your hair is black."

They slowly made their way to the dining hall, taking several stops so that she could rest in between. They took whatever was left from the daybreak meal and Ophelia began to feel her strength return with nourishment in her belly.

Ophelia noticed the other maidens looking at her and the alien strangely. No one approached them while she and Allie broke their fast.

The shadows seemed to grow darker around the small hall.

"Allie... how long have you been here?" She felt the need to fill the silence.

The girl lifted her spoon away, "Nearly half a solar-cycle now." She set the utensil down. "Why?"

Ophelia looked at the other females who were looking back at them. "Is there something I should know? About them?"

Allie caught onto her meaning. "The other girls," she gnawed her lip, "don't like me."

"Because you're Earthian?"

"Yes."

"Then they won't like me either." Ophelia looked like a Trentian in every fashion, white and albino with the pale undertones of fuchsia pastels—all accept for her jet-black hair, the color a beacon of her Earthian genes. Earthians were not afflicted with the breeder's plague.

She made her way, alone, quietly back to her room.

Ophelia was tired and confused, unsettled that she had lost so many rotations without her waking knowledge. Her

muscles grew tense as her mind drifted to the broken visions that had periodically haunted her throughout the noontide. *Crimson trees. Pasty hands. Yellow eyes.*

Each fleeting yet familiar. She couldn't focus long on any event as they continued to slither in and out of her head.

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip as her heart palpitated with the goldenrod irises in her mind, and just for a moment, she thought she saw them appear before her. Her body shuddered and she blinked with willful determination. When she opened them to look around the room, all was as it should be.

Ophelia felt her hands get clammy and felt the dew of cold sweat on her brow. She flexed her fingers as her bones solidified into stone-cold ice.

*Something is watching me.*

With bated breath, she crawled back into her now-made bed, hid under her threadbare blanket, and briefly wondered who came back to fix her bed and removed the red stains from the pads beneath.

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She woke with a sharp start hours later. Her small space was empty and quiet but filled with the deep shadows of darkness. The wooden door to the hallway was closed.

The blanket of night was at first welcoming and she basked in the privacy as her body settled back into the threadbare blankets. But something didn't feel entirely right. She could see slightly better in the dark, thanks to the Trentian genes she had inherited from her sire.

Looking around her room slowly, she scanned the length of her bed, the knobby metallic chairs that appeared to be the outline of bones, and the rectangular chest propped open in the corner before finally settling on the small table.

Her breath came to a stop as she saw a dark silhouette of a shadow extended across the top. Ophelia stared at it for a long time, trying to make sense of it, before her body forced her to give up.

Deciding it was her imagination, she fell back into a dream-riddled sleep.



The next several weeks went by in a slow, mundane blur, each day filled with an unending list of chores that often lasted from sunrise to sunset. Each night felt too short for a rest cycle.

Ophelia grew close to Allie. The other girl was an outcast amongst the small group of maidens. The fact that she was the blood of the enemy that had caused their fertility predicament often angered the other girls.

She and Allie worked the grounds during the daylight, as they were the only ones who could withstand the noon heat.

Allie handed her a dusty plastic bag filled with preserved seeds. Together in companionship, they rearranged the materials in the cropping shed now that the yearly harvest was over.

"Our crops don't appear diseased." Ophelia inspected the preserved vegetation with excitement.

Allie mumbled, "We're fertile so our crops are fertile." Ophelia looked down at herself as her elation turned to unease.

Her skin prickled as the heat of eyes burned into her flesh. She ignored the ripple in the darkness. *I try to ignore it every single day.* She turned to the alien and saw that Allie sported a fresh bruise on her arm.

“Are you okay?”

Allie stopped what she was doing. “Yes.” Ignoring the pointed question.

“Do you want to stay with me tonight?”

*Please stay with me. I’m not okay.*

With soft laughter she said, “No, I’m fine. Let’s finish up so we can eat.”

It had been decades since the end of the disastrous war. Everyone knew about it; it was then that the communications to the colony had stopped coming. The humanoids from Earth barreled into Trentian territory and when it was apparent that they were losing the battle for their galactic sector, they resorted to biochemical warfare and cybernetic machinery.

The Trentians were unprepared with their pyrizian battleships, expecting their plasma shields and nuclear weapons to win and their advanced warships to finish the job. Then infiltrators snuck in. The cyborgs. Unleashing a sleeper plague that only became apparent as the species became predominantly barren over the following years.

The next generations of Trentian women were born without viable eggs and even the men were affected to some degree, the potency of their sperm diminishing. Unfortunately, the move worked but also backfired upon the Earthians.

As the years passed by and the war continued to rage, the illusory differences crumbled away and it became clear that the two species could interbreed. With each side devastated to an alarming degree and half-breeds growing into adults, a reluctant and paranoid truce was struck.

Three generations came and went since the peace was formed, yet anger still simmered in every sector. It hurt innocent girls like Allie, and hybrids like herself. Ophelia formed a strange sort of kinship with the other girl.

*Maybe it’s because Allie is the only other girl my age who knows the expectations of having Earthian blood run*

*through your veins.*

It meant you were fertile, that no biochemical warfare during the great war had rendered you impotent. It also meant that Trentian women hated you in a spiritual, emotional way that could never be reconciled or fixed.

Being the only half-breed in the commune set Ophelia apart as much as Allie. Their blood was a commodity. Their friendship bloomed under similar hardship and bigotry.

The other girls also conspired about her behind her back.

"They say you talk in your sleep. That you stare into the shadows as if you're watching something that isn't there, and that sometimes you sleepwalk during the night," Allie had divulged to her on one occasion. At first, she thought the claims were unfounded until she began to notice it herself. She *did* often watch the shadows and she had found herself under the stars one night.

Ophelia could often see something move amongst the gloom. In the corner of her eye she would see a smoky figure standing deep within the shade, and whenever she turned to face the apparition it would be gone.

*I haven't been the same since I came here.* Her friend shrugged off her weirdness, attributing it to the endless hours of boredom to which they were subjected.

But even now, Ophelia could feel a pair of eyes bore a hole into her *soul*. She shivered as a very odd, gaping sensation triggered with the thought. The thought that a piece of her was gone.

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For Seraph, the years had gone by in a stagnant, undisrupted haze, and it was only now that he had been abruptly pulled from his meditation that he began to acknowledge the outside world again. The disarray that

the girl caused had reawakened something within him, and Seraph began to take notice of the changes that had occurred around him.

No other Soul Collector had approached him in over half a century, not since the beginning of the great war within the physical realm, and he realized that he had no idea what was happening beyond the mists of his domain—and that ignorance couldn't be tolerated.

But when he ventured into the dark mists of neutrality, he found nothing but quiet emptiness. No shifts, no vibrations. The void went on endlessly around him with little disruption as if the portals to the other ancients' domains had vanished.

Or his had drifted away.

As he walked softly through the darkness, he encountered other wisps. A stray band of souls drifting through, free and adventurous in their travels but most likely making their way to the Great Below. He encountered the occasional gut wrenching scream and delicate giggle of happiness.

The gasps and purrs of lovers.

He had even stepped into a floating memory out of curiosity, one that was left behind or forgotten. Walking through a stray memory was like being soaked to the bone by warm, sticky water. It was an invasive sensation.

The memory took him to the mundane, wintry day of a child who was on his back, making angels in the snow. Seraph breathed in the crisp, chilly air before he stepped back out.

A small smile tilted his lip as he wiped stray snowflakes off of his arms. He wondered how that memory would have been different if the child had seen him standing over his form.

He peered at the idle murk around him.

*Where is everyone?*

After endless hours of wandering through the dark mists, he gave up his search and return to his realm. It wasn't out of failure but because of *her*.

Seraph couldn't keep away from his acquisition.

At first it was the swirling beauty of her delicate soul that had consumed him, but now he was unsure if it was something else, something that bound him with invisible shackles, and he couldn't shake the disturbing feeling that he needed to be near her or he would die.

Maybe it was the stimulation of having something to do. It took his mind off of the mists beyond.

There was something about the girl that intrigued him and he couldn't quite put his finger on it. She had been beautiful and broken at the base of the ancient alien tree, and it had left him breathless with wanting. Even now his mouth watered with anticipation.

Seraph was unsure if it was her exquisite swirl, her alienness, or if it was something else entirely. Whatever it was, he longed for more of it. Her exotic smell.

*Because she is mine.*

He restrained himself at first but quickly gave up. There was either his lonely existence or her vibrant life, and it was easy to decide which one should fill his days. So he watched her—haunted her more like—and thought about her obsessively.

*'I would sell my soul to kiss you'* rang through his mind like a heady incantation. It gripped his heart like nothing had before. *A kiss, our kiss.*

Seraph rubbed his lips absently with the tips of his fingers as he replayed that damaging, life-altering touch.

The soft, sweet contact destroyed the world he had built up around him in just a mere moment. He wanted more and that *wanting* left him impatient and agitated. The girl was his, his alone, for the rest of eternity. *Surely I can wait her lifespan* – if only he could convince himself.

Seraph pictured her pale skin in his mind's eye and sprouted out his magic, melting from the timeless mists to appear within the shadows by her side. He didn't need to look around to know it was late afternoon. All he had to do was look at the way the sun fell on her skin.

They were outside the main building of her prison where she was kept with several dozen other girls near her age. High stone and metallic walls surrounded the simple ward as if the original builders ran out of materials halfway through. He thought they were a little excessive but he wasn't going to complain. The walls did block out the sun and allowed him to roam at ease.

He didn't have an aversion to the light; he just didn't belong there. It pushed him back to the darkness.

Upon first inspection, weeks prior, he was pleased at the odd beauty of the place. It was a chaotic cross between nature and technology.

The structures inside were predominantly made of stone and wood. The courtyard and lands within were flush with local flora. The terra beneath his feet resembled more of seaweed than grass.

It was unnerving to see a new environment and he spent many hours examining the world.

But amongst the alien nature were mechanical structures. The battle drones that scouted above the commune's walls, that flew in the air above and patrolled the exterior; they hummed with a constant electronic fizz. Large cables and wires could be seen sticking out of the buildings only to puncture deep below the ground. Seraph didn't care for that aspect; technology was the same everywhere.

His favorite time on this planet was right before daybreak, when a thin layer of frost crusted over the plants and machines alike. It sparkled right when the sun crested the horizon, creating countless diamonds over every surface only to melt away into the ground a moment later.

Seraph preserved those memories, knowing that he would want to revisit them again and again.

Coming back to the present, he slid into the shadows of the trees that grew near the great wall and focused on the girl from a distance. He had never actively watched her during the day before, choosing previously to visit her late within the night. He wasn't sure if she suspected his existence or felt his presence, but he thought she might.

Seraph was bound by their bargain. His power only came from her at this point and he could not interfere in her life unless she wished it.

*I'm going to do everything in my power to make her wish for my presence.*

She was on her knees, kneading black, wet soil with her bare hands. He noticed that when the soil was loose enough, Ophelia and another girl beside her dug small holes with their fingers and seeded the ground.

The two of them were on the outskirts of a functioning garden, or at least he thought so—not quite sure about vegetation on this planet. For an instant, he had an overwhelming desire to solidify his metaphysical form and smell the blooming foliage around him.

"You're getting dirt in your hair," his conquest said lightly to the other female, wiping her hands on the hem of her dress before dumping them in a pail of water nearby and drying them off.

Seraph watched with strange fascination as she approached the other girl and pulled her sable hair back, tying it in a knot at the top of her head. The other girl, unaffected, continued to plot little seeds into the moist dirt.

"Thank you, Ophelia," she said absently.

*Her name is Ophelia. How delicious and appropriate.* Seraph's lips tugged up as he passed the name over his mouth, testing it out.

"You're welcome. Your hair is beautiful. I don't want to see it soiled." She sat back down next to the girl. "We



should hurry though, it will be dark soon and we don't want to miss the twilight meal." Ophelia looked to the sky and scanned the vista above the wall; he followed her gaze. Metal turrets lined the top with hovering steel droids, monitoring the walkways.

*To keep the girls in as much as they kept everyone else out.*

*Except me. They can't keep me out.* He smirked.

Although the planet was alien to him, the system was familiar. From what he had seen of it, it was a primitive yet technologically advanced backwater world with an age-old feudal structure. The locals called the governing head a Warlord, and he had a group of Generals, his closest warriors, and they ruled this land by force and fear.

To him, it was just a bunch of power-hungry gangs fighting with desperation over territory and greed. The political unease of this world didn't bother him as long as it happened outside the commune's walls and his girl remained within.

He had never felt such a keen sense of desperation as he watched the life slowly drain out of her body. Every raw fiber of his being violently demanded to keep her alive, alive long enough for her to barter away her soul.

If she had passed into the ether, her soul would have been lost to him in the unending abyss. It could have taken him thousands of years to search her out and even then it could have been for naught.

*No* . He needed to tether her to him so that he would always know where she was, whether it was in this world or the next.

Every soul he had acquired was leashed to him, but he never called upon his minions; Seraph wanted nothing to do with them as beings but only as sources of power, unlike his ethereal alien conquest.

The more a Collector had in his repertoire, the more they could manipulate the void, to change the haze in any

way that would suit themselves, and because of the masses he owned, he controlled his own dominion of mist. His spot in neutrality was firm with his power; neither The Great Below nor The Great Above called to him.

Ophelia hiked up her dress and his attention reverted back to her, his train of thought lost as supple, moonbeam calves came into view. They glowed to a pearly perfection against the soil beneath her feet and were as smooth as polished white opals.

*I did a great job at healing her broken form.* He stopped himself from taking a step forward to get a better view.

She tied her skirt around her waist and kneeled back onto the ground. And it was then, with a twitch to his shaft, that he really looked at her as a woman and not as a conquered soul.

Seraph buried his self-control and moved over into a closer, shadier glen behind her, thankful that the day was coming to an end and the shadows were thickening.

He watched as her hands sunk into the terra, her delicate fingers losing themselves in the soil as she leaned forward over the ground. The girl was dressed in a thin, clinging, tawny-brown garment that accentuated her curves. Small patches of her dress were smudged with dirt.

Her hair was wrangled and twisted at the top of her head. Thick raven locks made wild hoops and strands that rebelled from the knot to caress her shoulders and frame her weary face. Even from this distance, he could see the tint of exhaustion under her eyes.

*She is too young for me to look at her like this. I have existed a thousand of her life spans.* He canted his head. *I will be looking at her forever. I have eternity on my side.*

Seraph drew deeper into the darkness as he watched the girls cover up their shallow holes. Ophelia's lithe movements, paired with her stained knees, sent red-hot fire roaring through his blood.

He wanted to tear her restrained hair down and mark up her moonbeam form. It had only been months since their pact was struck but he wanted her now.

*Seed her like she seeded the ground.*

Feeling his control splintering, Seraph left with a burning frustration.

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“ *D*id you hear that?” Ophelia looked around as she and Allie gathered up their tools.

“Hear what?” Allie peered at her with an expression of concern.

“That... groan,” she trailed off, turning toward the shaded glen beyond the garden, feeling an abrupt current of lust hit her. Allie stepped up beside her and took her hand.

“Let’s go. They won’t save us food if we miss the meal. Let’s not go to bed hungry.”

Ophelia trembled with foreign desire. She searched the shadows one last time before she let her friend drag her away.

That night, and the hundred nights after, she felt a presence near her that stayed by her side until dawn broke across the walls.

She lifted a spoon to her mouth, and the porridge glided like slime along her tongue. She was numb to the food laid out before her when an announcement was made. The other girls who were present stiffened in attention when she could barely manage to make her throat swallow the bland muck.

Ophelia had become withdrawn and indifferent to the events and people around her. She couldn't remember the last time she had gotten a full night's sleep. The constant pressure of the commune wore her down, and the exhaustion left her uninterested in everything but Allie. And that was because Allie refused to let her drift into herself.

A crone hobbled before them until she was central to the long wooden tables. The elderly woman was flanked on either side by guardian drones.

"Recently, we have had several women in our community reach an age to be paired off with the Warlord's men. It is time for them to undergo the ritual of matehood," she croaked as a tense hush settled over the maidens. "Our benevolent leader and Warlord to our lands has been made aware of this great development and has approved the rituals to go forward." The woman lifted her battered

bronze cane and swung it from side to side, pointing it at everyone and no one.

Ophelia looked over at Allie, knowing it would not be her, but unsure which maidens would be leaving the ward. Trentians aged at a slower rate than Earthians and she knew that her young friend was still in her middling teens. Being a half-breed, Ophelia's age was erratic compared to a normal Trentian or Earthian. She had been alive for nearly twenty-two planet rotations. She would have been considered an adolescent if she were a full-blooded Trentian, but an adult as an Earthian.

*Could I be one of these girls? I've been here less time than most.* Her stomach dropped at the sudden anxious realization that she was a wild card.

"You are all precious. You are the key to our survival and it is with your wombs that we can rebuild our great world—so we can take back to the skies and dominate." The crone settled her cane back down with a thunk and leaned heavily on it, her mannerisms and voice suddenly seeming tired. "Within the next fortnight, several chosen men from the Warlord's highest ranks will arrive to be gifted with the pleasure and the burden of producing strong offspring." She looked each maiden in the eye. "They will be paired with the eldest girls and then they will leave." She stomped her cane three times. The sound made everyone flinch. "During that time, every other girl will remain indoors and out of sight." The crone hesitated and turned toward her sentinels as if she was about to say something else but thought better of it. Ophelia watched with interest as the elder woman composed herself and turned back to the girls. "Do I make myself clear?"

One brave maiden on the other side of the room from her spoke up for their group. "Yes, Elder."

The woman nodded before turning toward the exit and slowly hobbled her way out in silence. When she was out of sight, voices popped up around her.

"When do you think the men will arrive?"

"I hope I'm one of the girls being paired off..."

"I hate this place."

"What if we can't produce offspring after all of this?"

One sister-mate caught her attention. *I wonder that myself*, Ophelia thought as her hands pressed against her lower stomach. *I'm not fond of this place either*. Not because of what it was, but because of the overwhelming pressure that weighed down on her shoulders—hers and those of every other girl.

"Are you okay?" Allie sat beside her.

She swirled her spoon in her porridge as she thought about an answer to that question. "I can't wait until it's my turn to be chosen. Until a great warrior comes for me and we can perform the ritual—" A sharp pain shot behind her eyes, stopping her from finishing. She dropped her spoon with a rattle as the image of a shadowy man standing in a dark forest arose from her memories.

Ophelia clenched her eyes shut until the vision and the pain dissipated. After several deep breaths settled her nerves, she opened her eyes to several sisters looking at her in curious concern. Disturbed and unable to bear their eyes, she got up and exited the hall. It wasn't until she was curled up on her bed that she heard Allie's footsteps approach her. The pallet dipped as she sat down.

"Do you really mean that?" Her friend asked, petting her hair, brushing it back with her fingers. The comforting touch soothed her. "You've always been so quiet about it."

She sighed, "I don't know. Yes? I thought I wanted it more than anything. I remember wanting it more than anything... until one day I forgot why..." She trailed off.

"Why do you think you changed your mind?" Allie gathered up her thick hair and began to braid it. Ophelia burrowed her face into her pillow and closed her eyes.

"Maybe because I'm not right in the head. I'm so tired and so confused."

Her friend softly laughed. "If you're crazy, then we both are. Maybe you're the only sane one and everyone else is crazy." Her friend was trying to make her feel better but the sentiment did nothing to alleviate her concerns. She shifted and looked at her for a moment before curling her legs closer to her chest.

"What do *you* want, Allie?"

A short pause greeted her question before an answer came forth. "I want to belong."

"You belong with me." Ophelia turned to look at her friend again, capturing her hand. Their fingers linked.

"I'm the only Earthian here, every other Earthian in this colony—if any are left—have aged into their elder years." Allie murmured, "I wish I knew someone like me. I feel lost all the time."

"I wish you could have met my mother."

"Me too." Her friend's smile came back briefly before quickly vanishing again. "I wish I could have met mine too."

They sat in contemplative silence for a while. Ophelia felt her eyes grow heavy with fatigue as her friend continued to plait her hair. She turned her head away to rest on the pillow and vaguely heard the soft patter of footsteps leave her room. She drifted in and out of sleep, losing track of time.

When she woke sometime later, she could still feel the tickle of her scalp and realized that Allie had never left. As her friend continued to tug wisps of her hair into braids, she relaxed back into a daydream-haze.

"Thank you," Ophelia sighed into the frayed bedding.

She really wasn't sure what she wanted anymore and she hadn't been entirely truthful with her friend. She did still want to join with a warrior, she had to still want that, because there was nothing else available to want. But whenever her thoughts drifted toward the inevitable future, that future felt foreign and wrong. As if her path had deviated from the one she had been born into.

*And I think I need to sleep or I am going to go crazy. I can't keep my thoughts straight, I can't focus, I can't remember.*

*I can't remember.* Ophelia clenched her eyes tight, trying to stop the tears from leaving. Her eyelashes glistened with dew.

*Something is haunting me.*

Whenever night took over the world and all was dark around her, the figure of a man had often appeared in her periphery. His shadow blacked out the light in her life and every time she focused on his presence, the shade would slip away. Only glimmers of memory and experience remained. It frustrated her in more ways than one. His somber presence would infiltrate her dreams when she wasn't awake, and Ophelia couldn't get away from him.

She contemplated telling Allie about him but thought better of it. *I don't want to scare her.*

At first she had been terrified but now she didn't know how she felt. He would flash in her mind or she would see his outline in the distance. She often found him lounging against a set-back tree by the gardens outside whenever she was tasked with cultivating the nursery.

Or if she was outside in general, he followed her along the wall. Ophelia tried not to look at him, tried to pretend it was all in her head but she knew... she believed otherwise.

The shadow kept her up at night, hiding under her blankets. But as the apparition continued to haunt her, she began to feel safe with it, comforted—like it was an extension of her life-force. She never felt threatened by it; it never hurt her.

Ophelia started to like it watching her, guarding her, because she felt protected. And even if he was a figment of her imagination, she did not want him to go away.

Because sometimes, when his presence went missing, she could feel it and it would leave her cold with longing. She was never alone when her shadow was around.



Her thoughts lifted when Allie ran her palms over her hair, spreading the locks over her back, only to tug the ends and twirl them around her fingers. The subtle sensations began to wake her up further as they spread prickly goose bumps over her skin.

A strange, electric heat coursed through her and settled over her heart before it moved between her legs. She instinctively pressed her thighs together to fill the aching, wanting, need that bloomed.

*What?*

Ophelia sucked in her breath. Her body stiffened. The tense reaction stilled the hand playing with her hair. She couldn't breathe, couldn't muster enough courage to look. Had she conjured her phantom?

She felt the slow rake of claws streak down her back.

Swallowing as she bit her lip, running her tongue over the pinched lower part between her teeth, she found enough strength to speak. *It's not real. He's not real.*

"Allie?" she asked, her heart stuttered.

The air chilled, and time itself came to a pause as the room blurred and darkened. Even the sounds outside her window stilled in quiet anticipation. A keen feeling of déjà vu overcame her.

"Ophelia," a dark, familiar voice answered with her name. The sound made her shiver with anxiety.

In a rush of breathless heat, she sat up and turned toward her specter.

The space around her descended further into a void as the figure stood and moved away from her bed to stand erect in the corner brume. She stared in disbelief as a thousand questions came to mind.

*He is real.*

Without the fear she knew she should have felt, she watched as the shade wisped and fragmented in the shadows. "Who are you?" She couldn't make sense of it, there were no details, only a translucent silhouette.

"You know who I am." His voice was deep and quiet. Did she know? Ophelia thought back to the men she had met during her childhood. "I'm not a man," the shadow answered as if he read her mind. She glanced at the door, briefly, contemplating making a run for it. But the distance looked far. She was compelled to stay and play out the hallucination.

"I don't remember." Ophelia curled her legs underneath her and sat on her knees, facing him. He pulsed a current of darkness that clouded over her like a warm blanket. *He is pleased with me?*

She didn't know for sure if the shadow had a malevolent purpose or if his visits were for another reason. Maybe the dark entity was a master of manipulation—Ophelia had heard stories of gods and supernatural beings and knew to tread with care. She watched as his amorphous shape blended into the gloom. The entity sounded like a man but she knew he wasn't.

A red-blooded man would never have the abilities this thing had. A red-blooded man would not spend half a year stalking a lone girl in a place where men were not allowed.

Ophelia knew what men looked like, their mannerisms, their presence, and this thing had none of that. He wasn't physical. He wasn't part of her world.

The silence extended as she sat there and thought about him. He was watching her watch him.

*He's waiting for me to make the first move.* Her mouth parted to speak—

The door to her room opened and the bizarre moment was lost. Her gaze shifted away to the intruder and when she looked back, her shadow was gone.

"What do you think you're doing?" Lucia stormed into her room. "Do you think you're better than us, half-breed? That you're special because you have Earthian blood in your veins?" She hissed.

"I don't know what you're—"

"I don't care what you think." The girl stormed forward and grabbed her hair, yanking her off the bed, pulling her out of the room. Ophelia struggled along, too tired and confused to fight back.

"What did I do?" She hadn't begun her chores, and had only been in her room for the rest of the morning break. Ophelia could feel her hair rip from her scalp. "Lucia, please," she gasped. "Let go of me." She grabbed the girl's hands. "You're hurting me."

"You've been missing for hours, you bitch. The crones took it out on us for the neglect." Lucia let go of her hair, tugging her hand out of Ophelia's grip in revulsion. The sudden release brought her to her knees.

"Hours?" She cupped her head, pressing her fingers into where the strands were torn from her head. She looked up at Lucia as two other girls came into view.

"You're such a heater-freak, blood-boiler," one of the girls slurred derogatory Earthian-born terms at her.

"We heard you talking to yourself in your room."

Ophelia peered at the girls but they blurred in her vision. She knew there was nothing she could say to subdue her sister-mates. They were angry and she wondered if it had to do with the news from the crone this morning. She couldn't bring herself to hate them, since the news unnerved her too.

They lived oppressed lives, they were cattle, and the pressure that weighed on their shoulders was heavy enough to make any of them snap in hopeless frustration.

"They should have chosen you and that heater bitch."

They were saying something to her but she couldn't focus on their words.

"Are you even listening?"

Her mind was consumed with her shadow; if she was *angry*, it was because they had interrupted a moment that she had wanted to last. Ophelia could still feel his presence but knew he was beyond her sight now.

Her shadow never appeared when others were present.

She looked around anyway. The voices of the girls faded out as she scanned the darkened areas around her. Ophelia had been dragged into the engine room below the building.

No one came here except for the mechanical drones. The powered-off robots hung limp around them as they retained a static-state, recharging and updating. Their systems siphoned upgrades from the network.

Neither she nor any of the maidens had access to the outside world, but the machines that guarded them did. When she was a child, she had more privileges than she did as a maiden. It had always irked her that they were to be secluded, unreachable, subdued.

But it wasn't the drones that she looked at, looked for—instead she scanned under every table, every chair. She turned her head and looked behind the machines, and even peered into the corners of the ceiling to find a ripple that didn't belong.

To her disappointment, everything remained normal.

*It was just a hallucination.* Ophelia was saddened by the thought.

"You're so strange," Lucia said. Ophelia returned her attention to the girls. Her voice held less hate and more of an odd, reserved tone to it. "What are you looking for?" She briefly turned her gaze to Lucia's face before her eyes wandered to the shadowed corners again. The girl was searching the dark with her now. Maybe she knew something was there too?

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Ophelia was left down in the rusted, mechanical room with the hum of the droids. The gleam of blue lights flickered around in a sporadic, technical rhythm but she could not focus on them. Lucia and the other girls had left

her there some time ago, kneeling on the grimy floor, clutching her head.

*I think they gave up talking to me. I would give up talking to me too.*

The purr of machines grew louder as a drone lit up in green and detached itself from the hanging cables. It captured her attention as it lifted off the ground and into the air, scattering dust mites in a swirl. It approached her.

A beam of red lasered over her form, twice, before the robot hovered away. Ophelia watched it ascend the steps and disappear into the commune. She wasn't a threat. She wasn't a man. She was a tired girl. A womb. A woman.

Her mind clouded with descriptive words until she lost her train of thought.

A crazy giggle escaped her lips.

Ophelia looked around and forgot how she got here. Her eyes fluttered closed as she curled up on the floor, passing out to the daydreams of metal.

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Seraph appeared from the top of the staircase and descended the steps toward her. He lifted her frail body and carried her back to bed. His fingers twitched with anger as he healed her scalp.

Ophelia looked up to the sky. The sun had just ascended but the rays were blocked by thick cumulus clouds. She blinked the sleep from her eyes and hugged herself.

Today the older girls were to be presented to the Warlord's chosen warriors. A thrill of activity charged the ward in the days leading up to the event. The chosen maidens were secluded, cleansed, and ushered to a den to await their fate.

Ophelia, along with the other young maidens, prepared each room for use. They scurried about cleaning up the perimeter of the walkways and courtyard. They wouldn't enjoy the fruits of their efforts, but their guests would. Everything had to look clean for the ceremony; the Warlord might be walking these paths, and the crones demanded perfection.

They had been preparing non-stop since the announcement and everyone was at the precipice of exhaustion. The days were longer, the nights were shorter, and the anticipation conjured a frenetic energy.

It was all beautiful and sad. The once-blooming flowers from the gardens were now picked and arranged in dying decorations around her.

Five girls would be presented today. Five women she had lived beside for the past solar cycle and a half. Those five made nearly a quarter of their numbers and it hurt Ophelia to see them go.

She left her bleak room and wandered through the decaying dormitory.

You get close to those you're caged with.

Only one girl had arrived since Ophelia showed up. A very young female, a child, that had hurt everyone to see enter the ward.

It wasn't hard to see that the numbers of fertile women were dwindling. This place, at one time, had held up to sixty women. But now with the inclusion of the elders, several servants, and the fruitful, they barely made up a band of thirty.

Now five would be leaving. They weren't friends, but they were family.

*What are they feeling right now, hours left until their warriors arrive?* The maidens had been locked into a room with several of the elders since the previous day. *Secrets... secrets.* Her eyes lifted to the morning gloom around her.

Some of her sister-mates had placed their ears to the large wooden door that enclosed them to eavesdrop, but it had been to no avail; no sound permeated the space.

Ophelia stood before that door. It was made out of solid amber wedge and if she peered close enough at it, she could see small carvings etched in the frame, eroded by time into indiscernible patterns. She looked it over one last time before ascending the staircase to the courtyard.

She breathed in deeply—the scent of Algia flowers and Star Dust. Ophelia caught sight of Allie sitting on a patch of grass, weaving the Star Dust petals into powdery, shimmering veils. The clouds broke above them and illuminated her friend in glitter.

With an ungraceful flounce, she sat down next to Allie, and began to pluck the thorns off of the gathered stems.

"You've been doing better recently," Allie mumbled without looking up, lost in her task.

"I've been able to sleep." She hadn't seen him since.

Her friend looked up and smiled. "I know. I check on you sometimes." She rounded a loose petal with the tip of her finger, her eyes grew distant. "Are you nervous for this evening?"

Ophelia handed the striped flowers to her friend and watched as Allie split open the stems and weaved them into the veils. Glittering dust enveloped both of their hands.

"I'm," she paused. "Not. It's a good thing. Maybe our sisters will have many children and the Warlord will be pleased."

"Do you really mean that? I heard Lucia weeping the other night."

Ophelia sighed. "She's better out there—in the world—than being in here. If Lucia bears children, she'll be revered and protected and so will her offspring. She'll have more of a reason to live, a warrior to keep her warm at night, and a life. A real *life* ." Ophelia dug her fingers into the dirt in annoyance. "Lucia would no longer be a prisoner here with us, a group of sad girls." She snatched a damaged flower and plucked it apart. Her fingers tense with the action. The pieces pooled in her lap.

"What if she can't?" Allie asked.

"She will."

"But... what if she doesn't?" Allie looked around to make sure they were alone, no doubt. "You've heard the rumors." Ophelia didn't need to look around; she was never alone.

"Allie," she whispered for her friend's sake. "We were tested fertile. We're fertile. Nothing will happen to her or us."

"I'm just afraid. I don't belong here. I wish I had been born into an Earthian colony."

"But you weren't," Ophelia snapped. "You have to deal with the same fate as the rest of us. None of us wish we



were imprisoned here, like chattel. Be thankful that you weren't found barren, Allie. If a Trentian female is deemed infertile, we still have a chance... but you, you're Earthian..." She squeezed the flower and crushed it in her hand.

A thorn from within stabbed into her skin. Ophelia gasped, dropping the Star Dust to reveal a deep gash along her thumb; blood trailed down her palm.

"Are you okay?" Allie lunged over and took her hand. She grabbed a handful of petals and wiped away the sanguine.

"I'm okay." Ophelia stared at the red gash numbly. It vaguely reminded her of something. *Am I okay?* The blood continued to well up and trickle down her hand. The opalescent petals did little to staunch the flow, instead smearing the stain over her ghostly skin.

Allie got up. "I'll be right back. I'm going to get something to clean you up. Grip your thumb tight," she called back, "keep the blood away from your dress." Her friend rushed out of sight.

She watched as her friend disappeared before returning her gaze to the crimson flow over her hand. It bubbled from the gash and slid down her thumb. Her mouth parted in awe and she twisted her wrist to watch the sun sparkle as the blood mixed with the shimmers of the flower dust.

Ophelia could feel his presence before he made himself known. She didn't know how she knew, but she was always correct in her assumptions about her shadow. He was never far.

The darkness from the overhanging branches grew outward, clouds above shifted to block out the sun, and a lulling quiet enveloped the deserted courtyard. She looked around to spot her ghost.

*My shadow hasn't appeared in weeks.*

As she began to rise and turn full-circle, a warm hand grasped her wrist. Startled, she twisted toward him and jerked back. The obscure silhouette of her parasite knelt a

foot away, his dark form hidden by unnatural fog this time and not by shade. Her knees hit the ground.

*It's the middle of the day. He's never appeared in the light before.*

She swallowed, "Hi."

"Hello, Ophelia." An electric bolt shot up her spine at his voice.

"Why are you haunting me? I've been sleeping."

She licked her lips as she watched her hand be taken and enclosed by his. The shadow lifted her thumb to his wispy lips and kissed the gash. The feel of his velvety mouth on her made her tremble; her thighs came together and she pressed the heel of her foot between her legs, hidden under her skirts. Her pain transformed to tantalizing desire, spreading throughout her body; her skin prickled with goosebumps.

"It doesn't matter how much sleep you get." He lightly placed her hand onto her lap and began to rise. "I'm not a phantom conjured by your mind." The sound of heavy footfalls, moving away, jerked her out of her shocked revelry.

"Wait. Please," Ophelia scrambled up and ran to his dark form. He stopped but did not turn to face her. "Please tell me why you're here." She looked down at her hand and found the gash had sealed up. All that remained was dried blood and Star Dust.

"I'm here for you." His voice was low, she strained to hear him.

"But why?"

"Because you're beautiful to watch." His form flickered, and for a brief moment she saw the man underneath. Armored and scary. "And because you're mine."

"How can I be yours if I don't know who you are? You say I do but I don't remember you." Ophelia moved to stand before him. "You're a stranger to me, no more than a shadow." The desire between her legs dared her to step

closer to him and search his hooded face. "I have not been given a mate. I'm not one of the bridal maidens today." She had to strain her neck to look up at him.

*He's very tall.* Her heart skipped a beat. *I do know him, but from where?*

At the periphery of her vision, she could see the dark mists of his form close in around her. And she knew then, at her most vulnerable, that she wasn't frightened by this creature but instead warmed by him. Her body crackled with static-life, as if his mere presence excited something deep inside her that she never knew existed.

Emboldened by his silence and his unwavering stance, Ophelia reached her hand up to touch his clouded form.

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"Don't." He caught her before she made contact. Seraph did not want her to see his face yet. He knew it might trigger glimpses of their first meeting. He squeezed her hand, loving the physical contact within his grasp and awed that she made the move to touch him. He wanted her to touch him everywhere.

Her eyes widened in apprehension and he loosened his grip on her abruptly, dismayed at her wariness. He watched as she pulled away and hugged herself; shimmering dust fell from her dress.

Seraph wanted to reach out and touch her again. He wanted to run his fingertips over her face, her crescent-shaped collar bone, and down her willowy arms until only their fingertips touched. But he didn't want to scare her. It was a risk for him to even make his presence known; humans often reacted badly to his kind.

But Ophelia wasn't human, not completely, and that made him wonder how a link was formed between them in the first place.

"Is something wrong?" Her beautiful voice caramelized in his ears.

Seraph found himself slipping into his thoughts as he stared at her dewy lips- wanting a repeat of their chaste kiss. She fidgeted as he stared, as if she didn't know how to take his perusal, and he loved it.

"Nothing is wrong."

She bit her lip and took a step back, her movements confused and uncertain. "You don't say much. How did you get within the walls... if you're real?" She shook her head. "Are you one of the Warlord's warriors here for the ritual?" Her eyes glazed over, "This isn't possible is it?"

"I'm within the walls because you are, and I am real, Ophelia, very real." He continued, "I'm not a warrior of this land." Were his social interactions off? "Should I say more?"

"Yes- yes, please." Her face lit up in anticipation. He cocked his head in amusement as her mouth opened and closed while she struggled to say something. *Maybe both of our social interactions are off.*

"Why am I yours?"

Seraph sighed and closed the distance between them. Before she could move, he cupped her face and blanketed them in his mists. His thoughts stopped for a brief moment when his aura enclosed hers.

She mewed in fear as everything went dark around them. He released one hand and compelled his lantern to appear at their side, illuminating the space in radiant silver.

"You're mine because you called for me. You let me into your life. You gave yourself to me." Seraph watched her as she took it in. "And I'm leeching off of your life."

Her breaths increased and he could feel her heartbeat vibrate erratically with his hand on her neck. Her eyes widened then narrowed.

*What is she thinking?* He gripped her upper arm as he waited for her to solidify her thoughts. He did not want her leaving the light.

"Where are we?" She trembled.

"We're in my domain."

Ophelia looked around then. The luminescence from the lantern grew brighter as she surveyed her surroundings. He had her in the midst of his home. Inert tables, chairs, bookshelves surrounded them. An unused fireplace made a focal point to the space, unlit for hundreds of years. Everything was made of grey-green petrified wood, the floors a grey stone. The heavy mists of the ether dulled it out.

"I'm no longer in the commune," she stated more than asked as her hand came up and rubbed her eyes.

"You are very, very far away from your grotesque breeder's commune." Questions like these were easier to answer.

The chrome light twinkled off of the flower dust still scattered across her dress and he was temporarily mesmerized by the glittering effect.

*I will dress her in cerulean sparkles and ruby embers. And my hands, my lips, my body.* Seraph stared at her while her gaze shifted around the bleak space with courage and curiosity. Rarely had a visitor come into his realm.

The ones who stumbled upon his portal accidentally were thrown back into the ghoul-grey fog.

She looked down to where his hand restrained her arm and pulled free; he let go with ease, but missed the contact immediately.

"Ophelia." He warned, "Do not leave the light. Stay within the lantern's aura."

She absently rubbed the spot where his hand had been. "Why?"

"You can get lost or be led astray. You are here before your time and it can be dire for you to willfully leave my protection." Seraph turned toward a chair and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees, watching his girl. She looked away from him and back out at the darkness.

"Why am I even here?" *Because I want you here.*  
"What's out there?" Her words were quiet.

Seraph couldn't help himself reaching out to stroke her long raven hair. The strands slipped through his fingers like silk.

"Are you frightened?" His mouth twisted up. "Dangerous things for someone like you. If you wander too far into the inky black, you may find your way to your nightmares, to devourers, eaters, beguilers, and contractors, and possibly the Great Black Gates." Seraph paused for emphasis, "You should always remain at my side."

"Monsters?" His smile devious now.

"They're... not exactly monsters. There is a place where the incarnation of evil resides. Some in your world would call it Hell." He watched for a reaction that never came. "No one is sent there, like many believe, but they go because it calls to them. It is the same for *Paradise*. The Great Above and the Great Below are an extension to the Earthian mysticism. I am unsure if it is the same for your alien species." He found her reactions to the offered knowledge peculiar.

She shook her head in confusion, "I'm in the afterlife? This isn't real. Why would the afterlife be different for both species?" Her eyes widened in horror. "Am I dead?"

Seraph watched as her eyes glazed over with shock. He reached out and took her chin, forcing her mind back on him.

"You're not dead. Like I said, you're here before your time." Seraph liked having her here. He didn't have to share her with anyone or anything else while he had her locked away. But he knew she could not stay, their time was coming to an end and the bargain they set could not change without mutual appeal.

His alien looked like a beautiful ghost. And he was not yet ready, if he ever would be, to divulge how they met.

"To answer your questions, you are in a *part* of the afterlife, the neutral ether. Nothing that resides here is all good or all evil. We are both, neither, and interchangeable. Neither gate will lure the steadfast beings here into their dominion. When a being changes toward one side more than the other, for reasons onto their own, they will begin to hear the call to their chosen gate."

"Do you feel a call? Are you neutral?—I mean, I never thought you felt dangerous. Why do you watch me?" Her questions were jumbled and confused.

*So many. I forgot how new souls had so many questions.* He was happy that she could not see him wince.

"I watch you," he said with finality, "because you're mine."

Ophelia closed her eyes and shook her head in confusion. "Please, tell me something, anything. It frightens me. It frightens me that you won't tell me." She shivered. "I am not yours." Seraph reached out and placed his hands around her slim waist. Her body tensed beneath them and he felt the black tips of his steely fingers hold her firm.

She sucked in a breath and he wanted to kiss her; he wanted to be the reason she was breathing. He licked his lips and strengthened his grip.

"Make me an offer. And I will answer one of your questions," he urged.

"An offer?" Her body was taut and rigid, only held in place by his restraints. She looked around the room questioningly. "What do you want from me?"

*Everything.*

"How about," he paused, shifting himself closer. "A kiss?"

"A kiss? For an answer? I'm not allowed to have relations with a man who has not been paired with me." She twitched in his arms. Seraph laughed internally at her ridiculous excuse.

"I'm not a man, Ophelia. I'm your shadow, remember? You can do whatever you want. Regardless, your life

belongs to no one but yourself and your shadow." He subtly closed the gap between them, his knees on either side, her body trapped between. "And no one will ever see what you do in the dark. What we do in the dark." He drifted his ether around them. "I know you want to kiss me."

Her eyes followed the outline of his obscure façade before her form loosened up. *She's complying.* Seraph grinned.

"And you'll answer one of my questions?"

"Yes." He spread his fingers out. "For an innocent kiss."

"Help me then. I cannot see your face," her voice whispered through their fog and fueled his hungry thoughts.

She leaned forward slightly as he ran his hands up her sides, savoring the feel of her cotton dress under his palms, her womanly frame beneath. He leaned up just as his hands tangled in her raven locks and pulled her down.

Seraph found her parted mouth with his and pressed into her while she reached into the mists to find his body to hold onto. Everything around them vanished.

Her mouth softened as he ran his tongue over her lips and penetrated her mouth. A soft moan spurred him on and he pressed her into his lap, keeping his arms around her as she awkwardly settled against his wavering form. Ophelia tasted alien and erotic, a taste he had never experienced before and could never describe as anything but *her*.

He lost himself in it, his shaft hardened painfully, and he wanted to lift her skirts up and find her female core. *I want to settle her over me. It would be so easy, she's already quaking in my arms.* Seraph felt her nails dig into his skin. *My sweet alien.*

*I bet her sheath is shimmering with Star Dust. I will make it glisten with Star Dust and my saliva.* He was overwhelmed with the desire to see her there, spread and wet before his eyes.

*A feast of tight wet sex.* Seraph groaned.



Right as he tore his mouth away to drag off her dress, she spoke and stopped the moment.

"Take me back, please. I don't want to be here anymore." She breathed, "I can't do this." Seraph's ardor cooled as he watched a single tear drop from her eye.

Had he miscalculated her reaction? His lust was forgotten. With deft movements and a modicum of anger, he embraced her and brought them back to the courtyard.

Ophelia clamored away from him and sat back down by the unmade flower veils.

"I am sorry if I frightened you."

She looked up at him, not with fear, but with sadness. "Will you protect me?"

His nails sharpened with the unexpected question. *Yes-yes. I would protect you, from everything.*

"As much as I can," he answered honestly. "I can only manipulate the physical world as much as you want me to." He stepped back into the shadows of the trees as he heard her friend approach. "But Ophelia, every request comes with a price. The laws of nature *demand* sacrifice and balance. And so do I."

Ophelia's face turned away and looked at the scattered, stripped flowers.

Her friend appeared and he de-formed. With an invisible secret over her ear, his nostrils filled with the scent of flowers, and the dewy essence of unfulfilled desire between her legs, he answered one of her questions.

"My name is Seraph."

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Ophelia lifted her face to the light and closed her eyes. She breathed his name. The sound tasted erotic. *Seraph.* She said to herself. His dark voice still heavy in her ears

with his kisses drying on her lips. She licked the taste of him into her mouth.

Her stomach fluttered. *I kissed my shadow and I want to kiss him again...*

*But I don't know him.*

*It is forbidden.*

"Are you okay?" Allie sat down next to her and asked, dipping a cloth into a small pail of water.

Ophelia looked quickly at her healed thumb and hid it amongst her fingers. "I'm okay, I'm fine. I need to go." She scrambled to her feet, leaving her friend behind in worried silence.

They were all huddled together, hidden in a room that overlooked the courtyard. Every maiden was present to watch and mourn as their sister-mates were paired off with men.

But no one was peering through the shuttered windows. Every girl sat away in sullen silence, even the ones who envied those outside. They formed a temporary hive mind. And for just a moment in time, Ophelia felt truly connected to the world around her. And the situation they were all in.

The tension, excitement, and the great unknown left each one of them wrecked.

Today was not a happy day. Today was one of great loss.

Silver spears of light flooded through the cracks and it made their gathering appear somber. They sat outside the rays. The light was bright enough to burn the eyes. Unlit, unused candles sat around, forgotten. The shadows were thick in the corners but there was no sign of *him* . She hadn't felt his presence since this morning.

Ophelia sat at the back and watched her sisters. Romana, one of the girls, was fidgeting. Trealé was silently crying. Sasha paced back and forth in silence, her movements scattering motes of dust throughout the air.

Most of the girls appeared closed off and solemn while they waited; she looked over at Allie.

Her friend was closest to the windows. She was the only one brave enough to look out and report upon the proceedings. Allie would peer out and quickly look away, her face continuously fluttering between emotions, pinched with worry or reserved and shut off.

No one spoke.

Ophelia felt guilty because she couldn't keep her mind on the events at hand. The gloom was a thick haze around her and for once she was excited by the dreary atmosphere. At one time it scared her, but as her shadow came from the darkness, it now excited her. She wanted to ball up in a dark corner and pretend he *was that dark corner*.

Ophelia had been rolling Seraph's name over her tongue all afternoon. She had hummed it in her mind like a lullaby. It brought a warm blush to her skin. She felt empty without him.

*Where is he?* Her eyes scanned the shadows for the hundredth time. He had vanished like a dream.

But stayed in her head like a nightmare.

Allie paced back to the crack and looked out. The maidens held their breath but after a moment, her shoulders sagged and she moved away. The mood settled back into dormant anticipation.

"What's happening out there?" a girl asked, the young one who had only been within the ward a short time. Too young to even be here. *Kids don't belong in a breeder's prison*. Ophelia rubbed her pelvis in disgust, a prickling pain bloomed at the thought.

"The crones are sprinkling petals over the walkways. One is moving to each corner of the garden with a stick of incense," Allie answered.

"Why? Is it a ritual of some kind before the ceremony?"

"Perhaps. I can't smell the incense from up here. Could be dragon's blood for love and luck, lavender for virtue,

maybe marigold for fertility.”

“How can you not know? Does this not happen often?” The child-maiden demanded and looked out the window herself.

“Not for two years... and not with so many girls,” Romana answered sullenly. “There’s not many of us. Only two were paired off the last time.” Romana went to the younger girl and pulled her back into the room. Ophelia’s curiosity was piqued by the conversation.

“Why so few?” She asked.

No one answered her for a heartbreaking minute.

“I heard the warring had grown worse and we cannot be kept safe. There are shortages in food and in wombs,” Romana’s voice darkened. “Shortages in everything. The Warlord and his soldiers have been fighting rival tribes of men for dominion.”

“Shortages in everything...” Allie mumbled.

“I thought it was because no one is of age?”

Romana laughed. “We’re all of age if you really consider it. Every one of us has our monthly. No. I think it’s because there is unrest outside our walls and we’re too precious to be risked.” Cynicism laced her voice. “Every girl in the courtyard is well within her twenties. Some of us have been here over half a decade. The women out there should have been paired off years ago.” She tilted her head back and stared at the limestone ceiling. “But I don’t know. How can I? Or any of us? We’re raised in sheltered, traveling orphanages as children. Our brothers are taken from us. Our parents weighed down by duty, leaving us to be raised by barrens, eunuchs, and the elderly.”

Ophelia looks at the other girls and wondered about their ages. It wasn’t something that was often discussed.

“Should we do something?” Allie tugged her hair.

Romana snapped her attention to Allie. “What does a vile Earthian care for a couple of Trent women? Your dirty species caused all of this to happen.” She went over to her

and grabbed her hair, pushing her down. "Go out there. I dare you." Ophelia moved to intervene.

"Enough!" The door to their waiting room opened. Romana stepped away as Allie clambered to her feet. Ophelia beckoned to her friend to sit with her. "Keep your voices down. If we so much as hear a peep out of you girls while the ceremonies take place, you'll be bloodied and your tongues will be pierced to the roofs of your mouths until you understand the concept of silence." An aged crone swept into their somber space, staring each girl down, withering them into heaps of submission before walking back out.

A click struck the knob. The sound was like thunder in the room; the girls knew they were locked in. Each listened to the fading clink of keys move down the hall.

"Stupid heater." Romana spat at Allie. Ophelia slid her hand over and clasped her friend's, interlocking their fingers.

Silence settled over their small group again. Romana sat back with the other Trentian maidens and hugged herself. Her heart ached for the other girls.

*I have a protector, but they don't.* She whispered his name softly and looked at the shadows again, willing him to appear. *I just need a glimpse.* To remind herself that he was real. She gave up with a sad sigh when she noticed Allie look at her strangely.

"Seraph? An angel?"

Ophelia's eyes widened. *Have I said his name out loud? Will I be in trouble?* She shook her head and tightened her lips, looking away. *Will he know?*

Allie released her hand and moved back to the window once again to stand watch over the courtyard.

She recoiled back with a charged gasp right as the blast of gunfire pierced the silence.

"Gunfire!" Someone shrieked.

Chaos erupted.

Ophelia tensed as everyone scrambled about in a flail of confusion. The sounds of machinery rumbled above them. Clangs and hums filled the ward as the mechanized guards came to life. Everything was happening too fast.

A screaming howl-like siren blared, breaking her ears.

A constant, steady torrent of fire burst in a multitude of directions around them. Ophelia's muscles caught up to the action as the realization hit. She cowered away from the windows as several courageous girls ran to them to look out.

Cries could be heard from the bridal maidens below; she hoped they were all right but knew she had no way to tell. The pungent smell of smoke and pewter wafted into their room, making the girls by the windows sputter and cough. Romana huddled opposite of her, her arms protectively around the maiden-child's shaking form. Her ears rang from the siren's wail as she took in the discord.

"What's happening out there?" someone screamed.

"The drones are firing at someone outside the walls. I think we're being attacked," Allie yelled. Ophelia covered her nose with her hand, taking long, sure breaths.

"The elders are rushing to the gates with guns. We need to help them!"

"Our sisters are unprotected down there!"

Ophelia ran to the door, just as several others followed suit, and yanked the knob. It rattled but wouldn't budge. She was pushed out of the way as another girl tried to no avail. They clawed at the hinges, banged the door, and screamed.

"It won't open!"

"Keep trying."

"Several of the drones have been shot down," another yelled across the room.

Her head spun from the smoke exhaust just as Allie pulled the shutters open. Screams of women and machines

drowned out the sirens as the drones whipped overhead. The ceiling trembled when something hit the roof above.

A racket of excited howls overlaid the other noises soon after; they did not come from inside the ward but were the sounds of a legion of men outside the walls.

The eerie and unfamiliar noise scared her even more than the violent attack. The howls were mixed with the constant barrage of bullets searing the air.

All but one girl gave up on the door while everyone else scrambled and crouched under tables and tipped over chairs; others huddled against the outer walls or next to the windows. A thick, metallic haze began to fill the room.

A drone roared right outside their window and an anxious silence choked the room. The battle droid shuddered within their line of sight in the sky, being shot at with perfect precision. It jerked as it realigned itself before it quaked in a frenzy. The drum of rubbing metal sounded as a final bullet punctured its mainframe, destroying the circuitry instantaneously.

It fell like a shooting star, circling toward the courtyard as it rained gunfire in a spinning, uncontrollable wave.

Shots hit right above their view-point just as every girl scattered to the sides. Ophelia watched as a line of bullets hit the heavy, wooden door to her left. The girl, banging at it, mercifully still alive but on her knees in shock.

When the fallen battle drone hit the ground outside with a mechanical boom, they lifted their heads in unison and looked at each other in reassurance. Everyone made eye contact as the hive mind took hold again. No one was hurt.

*Thank God.* Ophelia's stomach plummeted as she thought it. Praying to the gods made her feel nauseous now.

All at once, with the steady stream of gunfire, the other drones outside rained from the sky. She gasped at the blazing, gushing sight, like neon orange fireworks shot off at an alarming speed.



The sun was setting and the blaze illuminated the horizon in a golden glaze.

She looked around at her sister-mates and they were clustered against the walls now, staring out at the beautiful destruction. Quiet mews could be heard under the assaulting noises from outside.

Allie still stood by the window, the only one willing to continue to watch what was happening in the courtyard below. Her face was coated in smut and her hands covered her ears. Ophelia began to crawl over to her friend when the ground below them shook. She grasped the floor to steady her arms when a powerful shockwave thrummed through the building.

A deafening ring morphed into a long, humming vibration that waved through the metallic part of the outside wall. The men were trying to blast their way through the barrier.

All the girls could do was wait for the outcome, doomed by a single locked door. The violence-hungry men would have no problem breaking it down.

*They'll find a waiting room filled with breeders.*

Ophelia convulsed at the thought right as invisible arms circled around her. She looked down in shock at her torso when she was pressed up against a man's hard chest. The smoke rippled slightly where his limbs should have been.

Her hand reached up in reaction to wrap around a very physical forearm. She sucked in a dusty breath, the taste of gunpowder filled her mouth, as her hand tensed around an arm that wasn't there. Packed muscles, encased in hardened hide armor and silk could be felt as she ran her hand over him. A cage of straining muscles enveloped her.

"Shadow?" she said, looking around at the others. No one was focused on them as the room darkened in a sooty murk.

"Shh," the demand breathed into her ear. He dragged her softly back into a corner of the room, behind a series of

toppled over chairs and tables. When they stopped moving, the outline of his body expanded into a cloak that surrounded their forms.

*He'll protect us .* Her body loosened up at the thought. *We'll all be safe with him here- or at least I hope so.*

---

Men were tearing down the high walls outside. He tried to remain uninvolved but was unable to once the tides turned in an unfortunate way. *Unfortunate for them .* He smirked. Fire and metal fell from the evening sky and it made the colorful destruction complete.

Seraph had watched from a distance for the remainder of the day; he was tense—hard—and it tented his pants in an uncomfortable, frustrating way. It had been millennia since he last felt desire, and he could not remember how to handle it. His body urged him to take her, his alluring hybrid ghost, but she wasn't ready—not yet.

*I will wait for her begging.* His fingers elongated into necrotic black claws at the thought.

So he distanced himself from her until he could reclaim his control.

Down the forest paths, through the winding dirt roads, deep in the ruby foliage, he could see a rogue band of men creep up and cut off the troop of warriors on their pilgrimage to the ward.

Seraph found it interesting that the culture of this world had a pseudo-religious rite for these men to travel and enter the commune.

*They're just there to fuck a group of frightened virgins.* He spat. But then again, so was he, wanting nothing more than to have Ophelia in his arms again. She would not be frightened of him, though, instead offering her body as prettily as she had her soul.

It was easy to recognize the Warlord's chosen champions, as they all wore billowing black robes over their armor. The breeze made them appear as shamanic warrior-priests. Their faces covered in hoods, he could see the shapes of large metalloid masks beneath. A deep melodic chanting trailed their proceedings.

*Idiots should have kept themselves quiet.*

The five brides waiting within the walls wearing silk that was hidden under long veils of shimmering dust. Even for him, he found the odd ritualistic interaction forced. The symbolism of five wasn't lost on him either, five points of a star, a tribute to the cosmos.

Seraph sneered. Even this distant planet was infected by the Prime of Symbology. No wonder Earthian doctrines had pulled aliens into their afterworld. He hated those toying entities and the people who believed in them—gave them power. They belonged beyond the walls of the Great Gates, regardless of their self-proclaimed neutrality.

When the men attacked, it had been a slaughter. The chosen warriors were bogged down by their amorphous robes and the gangs behind, riding on electric motorbikes, couldn't get their guns out fast enough. The trap set by the rogue men had been conceived by luck, sheer force of will, or by infiltration.

*I don't like them being this close to the commune.*

Mechanical tanks and cannons powered on deep within the brush and the grunts of battle quieted as the attackers turned their attention to the ward.

He looked back at the high walls. *They won't hold if the ballistics are strong and continuous.* This was a planned maneuver.

Seraph ghosted to the fallen warrior-priests and examined their bodies. Their black robes hid the blood well but he could see the thick muck seep into the ground, their bodies pierced by bullets.

They hadn't stood a chance. *How can a man who ruled this land for so many years lose so easily?* He couldn't make sense of it.

But to his dismay, gritting his teeth in dubious anger, the savage scum who initiated the slaughter fought their way to the commune with their rusted technology and began to attack the gate. They went about it in an almost-possessed rage. *Do they think their defenses are down because of the ritual?*

Plasma cannons roared as blasts hit the high walls, shaking the foundations of the structure.

Ophelia was protected behind those walls.

His control slipped and the mists darkened around him as his anger grew.

*These disgusting aliens do not deserve to enter Ophelia's life, let alone touch her, frighten her.* He knew what men wanted and these men were not going to get it tonight. He felt his dual spears materialize over his back. They created an X to his formless outline.

Their weight balanced.

The alien miscreants howled in wild delight as they torpedoed the steel walls, and when the metal and stone began to crumble, they transformed into a pack of rabid beasts.

"Monstrous men who would eat up the world without a thought," he sneered to himself.

Seraph watched from the tree-line, a vermillion forest at his back, his hand poised to clutch the shaft of his weapon.

Screams filled the evening and crashes overlaid the shrieks; he could hear faint feminine fear beneath it all. He solidified and the rank of sweet, copper blood filled his nostrils.

He tore his silver-etched needles from their restraints and beamed to the closest alien scum. The razor-sharp tips deformed then reformed within the man's ribcage, splitting it open. His last action, a garbled cry.

A small fissure of energy crackled around him in disturbance.

Seraph twirled his spears as he approached the men from behind. Their bodies fell at his feet as their hearts exploded from their chests. The taking of lives was like a long-lost friend to him. One he hadn't spoken to in ages but seemed like it was just yesterday.

He appeared in front of one of the howling Trentians, only so he could see his pale eyes widen in shock as he skewered the man. The pointy tips of his needles punctured the man's belly and snaked up through his lungs; blood gushed from the alien's mouth. He watched the bloody vomit pour out until it soaked into the ground.

Anointed with death, Seraph swung the blood from his spears in crazed glee.

He appeared by the next, an especially loud savage, and grabbed his neck, flipping him onto the ground; the impact crushed his throat. He transformed his spear into a pugio dagger, sliding it into the man's mouth, enjoying the wide edges slice through his cheeks, forcing the heathen to eat the metal that would cause his death. The smell of sour sweat and unwashed men pulled him from his bloodlust.

It hadn't taken the heathens long to notice their numbers drop with the lifeless corpses scattered behind them. Yells rang out in warning as the attack on the wall shifted to confront the new target.

*Me.* Seraph smirked.

*But not tonight.*

He formed away—knowing his diversion had worked, the men would falter for a time and search the woods. He appeared next to Ophelia's side as his weapons vanished and he pulled the frightened girl into his arms.

Seraph took a moment to breath in her hair, replacing the rot in his nostrils with flowers.

"Shh," he rasped, concealing them in the corner. It wasn't lost on him that her body loosened up against his.

Seraph felt himself grow hard again as he realized he wished they could stay like this for eternity. Her rosy soul surrounded by his obsidian one.

*I want to cover her in more ways than this.*

"I knew you would come," she whimpered, as she looked around at the others.

"They can't see us," he reassured. "Keep your voice low and they will not hear us as well. I will always come."

"What's happening out there?"

Seraph loved her voice and couldn't help squeezing her against him. "A band of men attacked the warrior-pilgrims before the gates." He paused. "They may have thought the ward was open but I don't think that was their main goal. The men out there are angry. The whole thing reeks of wild vengeance." *Idiots.*

"Are they all dead? The warriors?" Her voice wavered and she brought her knees up to her chest. He draped his arm around them and pulled her legs to him and until she was a ball in his arms.

"Yes."

"Are we going to die?" He tilted her face so he could look at her.

"No."

"Will you protect us then? Will you stop them?" *I'll protect you*. He didn't care about the others.

"Yes." Seraph went silent for a moment, bound by their bargain. "After we make an exchange." Ophelia went still in his arms. His power in the physical realm was bound to her. A price would be paid. Seraph needed her to want him to continue through a sacrifice of her own.

"A deal? Like before? What can I give you that will equal protecting the entire commune?" She shook her head, not comprehending. "Like my soul? I own nothing of value."

He laughed, "Not that. I want something else." She had already given him her soul; she just couldn't remember.

The conversation came to a pause as the blasts to the outer walls took up again. The smell of plasma radiation filled the space and overshadowed the gunpowder and sweat. It wouldn't be much longer before the outlaws breached the gate.

"I want this all to go away." That wasn't what he expected. "What can I trade for that?" She jerked against him when more bullets blistered the smoggy space.

"I would prefer to kill them."

"No. Make it go away. No more death," she pleaded

"How do you suppose I do that? Killing them would be much more effective." *And enjoyable.* He wanted to feel their dying life-force enter the void through the tips of his spears.

"If you killed them, then the walls would still be damaged. We would still be unprotected. The Warlord's warriors would still be dead and more savages will come."

Seraph sighed, seeing the carnage he had envisioned slipping away. "I'll kill everyone who comes. I'll repair the walls." *That might work.*

"How would that solve anything? Make it go away, stop everything from happening... and I will give you my soul. Save my sister-mates." She said with a conviction he wanted to hate. "Save Allie."

"You want me to alter the timeline, to infiltrate minds and change their wants and desires? You ask much of me, Ophelia." His voice went dark.

"Can you?" Her eyes widened as she realized the enormity of her request.

"For a price worthy of that request." He gripped her chin and forced her to face him, revealing his insidious yellow eyes. "It will be limited. I am not all powerful." He had to make sure she knew.

"But you can? Can't you? How is that possible? What are you?" Her mouth parted open in shocked revelation. *And she thinks I'm just her shadow.*

"So many questions, Ophelia, someday you'll stop wanting answers."

The howls of hungry men, seeing the victory line, rose from the courtyard. Weeping overlaid it, coming from the other girls and he saw her friend, Allie, look around the smoke for his girl. They didn't have much time.

"Take my soul," she gasped.

"I already own your soul."

"Wha—"

"I want your kisses." He interrupted. "I want every kiss of yours for eternity. Your lips will never touch another. They will never press against a mirror. They will never pucker around a choice morsel. They will never be blown from your hand." Seraph stopped, a magnificent explosion lit up the night and he could see the rest of the wall begin to fold in on itself and crumble. "They will all belong to me. Forever." He finished, "I want dominion over your mouth."

She wasn't looking out the window or at the maidens around her. Ophelia was looking at him, her eyes wide, her mouth parted open, her face covered in sweat and ash. Seraph slid his hand and grabbed the back of her head, locking her in place.

And just before he lifted the shadows of his face away, she breathed her answer.

"Yes."

He would have killed the men for free. But for her kisses... he would turn back time for those.

And so he did.

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Ophelia blinked. And everything was different.

She was sitting with the other maidens, but now it was light outside. Romana was tapping her foot and Allie was standing by the closed shutters—peering out.



She sucked in a breath and stood up, the stool flipping over at the sudden movement. Every girl turned their gaze toward her. Someone whispered an incoherent insult as she rushed to the windows and looked out.

“What’s wrong?” the child-maiden asked.

Ophelia didn’t answer, instead scanning the courtyard and the walls. The sun was well past its zenith and was making its way down to twilight. The streams of incense ascended in the air, flowers adorned the walls, and even the battle drones and turrets were back in their dormant mode.

Someone pushed her out of the way.

The ceremony commenced as if no rage and ruin existed. But Ophelia knew. Even with the sad but beautiful mating rituals taking place below them. Ophelia knew there were men outside their walls, men with weapons that could tear it down, men who would destroy the world around her and make the stale hell she lived in seem like heaven.

She knew now that Seraph was more than a shadow, and that he would come to collect payment. Her fingers grazed her lips, and for a heart-stopping moment, she was afraid of the consequences if she mistakenly kissed her fingertips.

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Late that night, twitching in bed, she lay awake. She waited for him to come but he never did. He didn’t come the next night either, and when the third night came and went, Ophelia began to question her sanity again.

*H*is mind was split open in two. Seraph's body stretched and stiffened as his mind envisioned his hands soaking in alien blood, the frenzied men who surrounded Ophelia lying dead at his feet.

He gripped his skull between his hands and massaged his temples. Seraph had made himself known to other souls in the physical world without allowance and now he paid the price.

Seraph breathed in deeply but the smell of his alien was gone.

The loss of souls he had collected, ones that had been with him from the beginning, left a hollow ache in his mind. Power drained out from him to be lost forever, just so he could restore the tear he had created.

He had killed men by choice and that interference created a fissure between the realms. Earthians denied magic, they disbelieved miracles, and scoffed at the metaphysical. And because of that, he was limited in how much he could manipulate outside the ether.

Seraph sacrificed a horde of his souls to repair the break. Whenever a crack formed that was not repaired, it could cause irrevocable damage to the world of new energy as well as the ether.

It was on neutrality's hands and its denizens to keep the forces of good and evil from directly influencing creation. Both gates would seize the opportunity and when the gates were in close proximity to each other, a repellant effect happened. Like two giant magnets on polar ends of the spectrum, fighting for the gateway yet being pushed away at the same time.

The effects were devastating.

And the gates weren't the only things that wanted to return to the living.

He had not existed when the ether was formed and the metaphysical took shape but he had been around long enough to know the vague details.

Free will was the utmost important thing to every being in the ether and it had to be protected at all costs. So he sliced off a piece of his collective mana to repair not only the fissure, but also his trust with the neutral plane.

Losing a piece of himself was one thing. He could always regain his souls if he really wanted to. It hurt like it would if someone had cut off a vital part of his body. No, the worst part was the effect his choices had made on *his* anima that was the most frightening.

His domain had shifted. And now he was located in a darker, deeper, unfamiliar area of the mists. His home had moved closer to Hell. *I have moved closer.*

Seraph stared at his lantern. The silver-bullet light held true and bright. He walked over to it and peered inside. The gleaming, ancient orb that powered his lantern flashed. As long as it continued to emit its glowing light, he would not lose his way in the mists beyond.

He turned from his lantern and entered the haze. He didn't mind the dark murk; he just didn't like change.

Another Soul Collector's portal had yet to appear for him and he mulled over the idea that maybe the others had moved too. Maybe he had been caught up in his own head

for so long that he had not realized when his brethren drifted away.

And then there were the aliens. Seraph wondered if there would be a convergence at some point—when both species became one.

A new gateway would emerge. *The Great Middle*. He laughed, *More like The Great Link between. I wonder if their beliefs harvested a better afterlife than ours*. But he didn't think so, knowing what he did of the alien race.

Change may be a good thing. It may prove to be very interesting.

Seraph brushed past a stray orb as he continued forward. The smell of orange blossoms trailed behind it.

He would have loved to encounter the souls of the men he had slaughtered but knew that was unfortunately impossible, now that they never actually died.

*I would penetrate their memories and rape their thoughts. Hold them firm until their essences shook with revulsion and fear at my intrusion*. He would use the knowledge against them and manipulate their naivety. After all, he knew more about the mists than most.

Seraph ghosted back to where he had brought Ophelia. Sitting down in silence, he replayed the moment he had her in his arms. Her black locks twisted in his hands. The feel of her sitting on his lap.

He sat down in that same chair and pictured her naked in front of him. The thought healed the pain in his head but replaced it with stiff discomfort between his legs. Seraph fantasized about her dancing around naked through his castle in wild abandon.

If he could, he would keep her that way. His hand grasped his heavy bulge and he rubbed it in slow, savoring measure. *Her mouth is mine. Her kisses are mine. She could deny them but she can never give them away*.

He sought out their link and appeared in her stark, austere room. He knew every square inch of the space by

heart. His eyes landed on Ophelia. She was sleeping fitfully—and for a moment, he debated whether he should awaken her.

*Or stand over her bed and watch her like a nightmare.*

A week had passed since he turned back time at her request. He needed that time to heal and come to terms with his blatant disturbance of the walls between realms. Every moment had been torment, and he could not deny now that he was as tethered to her as she was to him.

Again, he felt like he would die without her.

Seraph stood over her with indecision for a time. He chose to solidify and breathe in the smell of her, rather than remain numb in his corporeal form. He moved to her side and brushed a stray strand from her face. Her eyes flinched before settling back into sleep.

Outside the window, the night was deep and time was in his hands. He had forgotten what time represented, after having so much of it, and he knew that Ophelia would not remain in this time forever.

*Someday she may refuse my presence, banish me from her thoughts.* The ideas sunk his stomach and angered him.

*How dare she have so much control over me? If she ever pushes me away —back into the shadows—to retain our original bargain, I will haunt her into madness. Until she feels what I feel. I will truly become her shadow then, and the bright light of day will be her only salvation.* His fingers twitched in unwarranted rage.

“Seraph?” Like air to his lungs, her voice settled his heart. “Where have you been?” He watched as she sat up on her padded cot. Her hand came up to rub the sleep from her eyes.

“Fixing the tear.”

“You really did it, you turned back time.” She breathed in abject awe and ran her hands through her tousled hair in shock.

“At great cost,” Seraph answered with annoyance.

“My kisses?”

“For you, yes. But I lost the chance to destroy those men.” Blood clouded his vision. “They are still out there, Ophelia, and they still want the same things. Altering the timeline could only ever be a temporary solution.”

“So they will return...” her voice soft.

“Yes.” He hovered over her, trying to get closer. “And you will have to sacrifice more if you want them gone again.”

She shook her head and brought her legs up to her chest. She offered the vacant space and he sat on her bed.

*I will gladly join you in bed, sweet Ophelia.* Seraph could sense her pulse flutter over her throat and her short breaths increase as tension blossomed between them.

“You said,” she stuttered. “You own my soul.”

Seraph snaked his hand under the threadbare blanket and caught her foot. She jerked but he held it firm as he rubbed his thumb soft and slow along her arch.

“I do,” he answered.

“How?”

“You gave it to me in bargain.”

In amusement, he drew back slightly as Ophelia pulled her foot free of his grasp and disengaged herself from the blankets. She towered over him on her knees and pushed him hard. Her hand came down to hit his invisible chest in frustrated anger. The more she felt, the more her hands came down to pound on his chest. “Don’t say that! I did not give it to you. I would remember that.” Resentful tears dewed her eyelashes as she continued to assault him. Her anger made him happy, it was better than her glazed exhaustion. “I would remember you,” she cried.

He caught her flailing arms and, in one deft movement, pinned her to the bed. It creaked under the excess weight. The feel of her body trembling and her shallow breaths hardened him to the point of pain.

Seraph placed his lips over her ear and kissed her lobe with a smirk as he took the opportunity to grind his cock

against her stomach. Her night-shift bunched up with his efforts.

"You play with darkness, Ophelia, not a smart move if you can't control it or touch it." To prove his point, he briefly vanished before reforming. Seraph whispered in her ear, "I'll take those kisses now." Taunting her.

"Will you ever tell me what happened?"

"Perhaps. One day." *I will never tell you.* "Kiss me," he urged.

"Only if you give me something in return." Seraph drew back and growled. Her black hair haloed her face and it made her skin all the more ghostly.

"I won't tell you. Not even for your mouth." He moved to get up.

"Show yourself to me then."

He stopped. "Ah. I was wondering when you would bring that up." Seraph snickered, "Are you sure you want to see me? My eyes are piercing, my face is unholy, but will my body live up to your expectations?"

"Your eyes are entrancing, your face is obscure and beautiful, and I have no doubt your body will not bring you shame." She provoked him.

Seraph stopped himself before he bellowed in laughter. "I would be a terrible Soul Collector if I was ugly. Ugly beings are never given anything but charity."

"So that's what you are... A *collector of souls*." Ophelia's mouth twitched up, and the insanity of their conversation wasn't lost on either of them. "And here I thought you were my shadow."

"I am your shadow." His voice dropped. "I will always be your shadow."

"If you were a beast our interactions would be no different."

He ran the sharp tip of his nail across her cheek. "Even beasts can be beautiful."

Her hair fell from her face as she shook her head. "Are there others? Like me? Who you torment and haunt and protect?"

Seraph sat in quiet retrospect before he answered her. "Will you come with me?" He offered his hand. "I'll show you."

Ophelia looked at it and him in curiosity. "Back to the land of the dead?" She asked. "I'm not so sure..."

"You will be there in body and mind." He hedged, "Like a waking dream. Or a nightmare if you prefer." He twisted his lips, testing her courage. He watched as she locked him with an emotionless gaze that he couldn't read.

"Will it be dangerous?"

"Very. But you'll be with me. It's very beautiful too, I can show you things that you couldn't even imagine." He shifted closer to her. "I would like to show you."

"Can I die there? Will you bring me back?" She twisted her fingers together. He could tell she was considering it.

"Yes. To both. And would death be such a bad thing? It can be a sublime moment in your existence."

"I don't want to die, Seraph. I have things to live for."

"You don't know what living really is. Come with me, and I'll show you." He took her hand, unwilling to wait for her to offer it. *You'll wish for death after I show you.*

He waited for her response but the wait wasn't long. Her courage strengthened from him and the flame of curiosity filled her eyes. She squeezed his hand in response.

Seraph cloaked them in his dark shadows until even the moonlight could not penetrate it. His arms circled her unkempt frame and brought her back to his world, until he released her and they stood before his throne of petrified wood.

The glow of his lantern brightened with her presence. *Calm down, cage, you're embarrassing me.*

He kept his hand locked around her wrist, not wanting her to go farther than a few feet from him. He hadn't lied



about the danger of this place. If Ophelia wandered off, she could be lost until death came for her. If she entered into one of the gates as a physical being, she would come back out as something different, no longer human. He had been around long enough to see the effects that the Great Above and the Great Below had on the living.

Seraph wrapped his arms back around her as she looked at him. "Kiss me." He squeezed her. "My lips feel cold without yours."

"Let me see you. Those were the terms."

His mouth twitched, "You would make a great Collector. Bargaining even for the most mundane of things. Or a salesman, forcing payment for any action you take."

She looked up at him and traced her eyes with his fragmented outline. "I just want to see you. Is that so much to ask for?" She cocked her head. "I can feel you but my imagination is lacking. Please let me see you."

His yellow eyes narrowed at her begging.

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She knew his eyes and his voice. She knew his presence and she knew he would always be watching her. But she didn't know what he looked like and it perplexed her. *I want him and I don't even know what he looks like. He makes my heart race, until I can't breathe, and I don't have a fantasy but smoke to fuel me.*

*He could be a monster and I would still want him.*

Seraph's eyes caught her attention with the way they glowed in the dark; if she did not have night-sight, his eyes would have invoked thoughts of fiends and demons. She gasped as he lifted the veil away and the gloom that cloaked him melted like streams into the ground at his feet.

His hair was dark, shoulder length and fell in waves as the shadows fell off of it; they clung to his strands until the

very end, weighing them down. His shoulders were broad, and without his armor of darkness, she could finally see the body hidden underneath.

Seraph was covered in faded leather and black silk. Her hands twitched as she remembered the feel of it beneath her palms. A long jacket reached his feet that concealed his frame but she could see the outline of wiry muscles hidden, could remember them straining against her. If his wrists and his neck were any indication, he was a block of silken steel.

No weapons adorned his body.

*Odd. Men always carried weapons.* Ophelia now understood how people would give this angel their soul. Seraph leaned back and let her look at him. *He was right, his beauty is dangerous. I feel manipulated just looking at him.*

"I will take that kiss now." His voice was low. He crowded close to her and she took a startled step back but moved nowhere as his hands latched onto her neck.

Her mouth parted as his thumb ran across her lower lip and pushed it to the side in unrestrained desire; it dipped in and slid across the bottom row of her teeth. Ophelia nipped him softly and was rewarded with a groan. Her hands came up to grip the lapels of his coat as he coaxed her mouth with his hand.

Seraph's eyes flashed as he held her in place and took her. And before she could process the assault, she was feasting on his lips as fiercely as he bore down on her.

The hand that cupped her neck snaked down her back and pushed her hard into his chest until wanton lust seared her. Ophelia moaned as an empty, demanding heat raged through her.

*Fill me.*

She couldn't see it, but she could imagine their bodies merge for just a blissful, endless moment. Yes . Ophelia

reached up and ran her nails through his hair as her back bowed backward.

Her eyes blinked open to see him watching her with delicious intensity and that gaze had all the power to drive her insane.

Their lips parted with a bite and it was then that she realized she had climbed him like a tree—her legs hooked around his waist. A teasing smile slowly lifted his lips.

*He never closed his eyes*, she realized. *He'll never stop watching me*. It should have frightened her but instead it made her feel powerful.

"You made me work hard for that," Seraph said as he placed frantic kisses along her cheeks and hairline. He moved down to trail his mouth over her neck. Teeth scraped her skin.

"I'm sorry." *It was worth it*.

His laughter filled her ears. "You are anything but sorry." And she could feel the collar of her nightgown begin to tear as he pulled it to reveal her collarbone. He latched onto it like a leech. The feel of his velvet tongue lapping at her skin made her squeeze her thighs around him.

"Okay. I'm not sorry."

"I want you. I can feel how much you want this." His admission made her heart stop and panic replaced her passion. Seraph lifted his head from her shoulder and stared at her. *He's waiting for an answer*. Her breath caught as his beautiful dark hair fell in disarray over his cheeks. He hefted her more securely against him as she loosened her hold and swept his waves away from his eyes.

"I'm a breeder," she murmured dejectedly. His eyes darkened into sinister orbs with her answer and his hands tensed against her skin.

"You want to save yourself for a marauder? A disgusting, unwashed alien heathen to mate with?" He loosened his hold and her legs slipped down like water until she stood on her own two feet again. "And for what? Because that's your

fate, your life? You have no life in that tiny, shabby ward of yours." Her hands let go as his anger crested. "What do you really want, Ophelia? To lie back, get fucked, and produce children so your primitive world can continue to war?"

She shook her head in answer.

"You don't know? That's right, you don't actually know what you really want. How could you? You sold me your soul for *dust*." He moved away in rage but abruptly turned back as the darkness started to slither back around him and pointed at her. "Don't ask. I won't tell you."

"Seraph, please stop." She reached out to grab his jacket before he vanished. "Don't pull the shadows back." Ophelia pleaded but they wormed over her hand and his body began to flicker and dissipate. "I don't want to be a breeder..."

A loud, exasperated laugh roared around her and she flinched at the sound. This wasn't the same laughter he released before, but something cruel and merciless.

"Oh, Ophelia. There is so much you need to learn. If you only knew the meaning of what you just said. It's quite funny."

Her confusion transformed into her own brand of anger at his words. "I won't ask because you won't tell me. I get it. But don't mock me." Her hands clenched and the remaining flecks of desire, heated with hurt. "Take me back. There's nothing here you can show me," she said with numb finality.

Ophelia caught his eyes and for a second they widened into something close to surprise. Her pulse raced with a myriad of emotions but above all her confusion and desire remained heightened.

*I wish I had my own shadows to hide behind. HIDE BEHIND.* Anger laced the thought.

His eyes narrowed as if he had heard her.

"No."

"No, what? No you won't take me back?" Seraph stalked toward her until he was towering above, looking down at

her. She held her ground but felt a magnetic pull to his body.

He let out a long, suffering sigh and the inky mists around his body faded with his breath. Ophelia realized that she had been holding her breath as well.

"I'm quick to anger, Ophelia. I won't take you back. Not yet. Please stay here with me, for a while, at least." He righted the collar of her dress that had slipped over her shoulder. She could tell he wanted to touch her but was holding back, like she was.

She searched his eyes and tried to read him but was at a loss. "Why did you get angry?"

"Because I don't want to imagine you with another man. Especially one who is not worthy of you, and no man is worthy of you." She stepped back as Seraph's eyes flickered with fiendishly, horrible anger. "Any man who touches you will have his nails ripped from his fingers." His nails twisted and turned long and black. "Their fingers ripped from their joints." His face wavered and she watched darkness ooze out of him in streams. "His hands cleaved from their wrists." His bleak aura caressed her cheek. "I don't want to just be a shadow to you," he ground out, and his features went back to normal.

Ophelia took a deep breath and reached up to tug on his hair. "You're not *just* a shadow to me. I never really thought about being with a warrior until you began to haunt me. The thought pains me and I don't know why." She shook her head and her hands unconsciously lowered and pressed into her pelvis. "And you're not just a man, you're a shadow as well, and something beyond both. Thinking of being with you doesn't pain me." She smiled, oddly without fear.

"You're very beautiful, Ophelia," Seraph whispered and she thought she saw him cringe as he pulled her hands away from her womb.

"I do want you too. I want you to be the warrior I'm paired with."

And his beautiful, sinister smile came back. His eyes flashed like a wolf's in the dark and for a moment she thought she saw his teeth sharpen. *That* look branded her skin with chaotic fear. Her mouth opened into a chilling gasp. But it was gone as soon as she imagined it.

"I know," he said with apparent amusement and moved away but kept his fingers restrained around her wrist. Her blood heated like an infection outward from where he touched. "Let me show you something beautiful."

She followed close behind him but his gait was long and she could not see in the darkness of this place as well as he could.

Ophelia curled her arm around his and hugged it, his shadows enveloping her form like an extension of his being. She felt her protector come back and his leery smile fade from her memory. The heat remained.

A door appeared before them as he led her away from his throne.

The silver lantern that sat sentinel next to his seat trailed behind them and bobbed like it was floating through water. The light it emitted followed as they stepped through the exit. Her breath billowed out before her face as the temperature dropped. The chill felt heavenly against her skin.

Her Trentian roots desired cold temperatures, while her Earthian blood longed for warmth. The colony was temperate but never comfortable. The full-blooded Trents suffered in the middling climate where she barely noticed. It was why she and Allie often got the outdoor chores.

The climate was supposedly perfect at Xanteaus Trent. The Trentian world was a crystalline planet that sparkled with moonlight and star shine. The oceans were onyx and the land as pale as the Trentian eyes. There were silver cities and underground kingdoms and a star lived in its center. She couldn't imagine what it looked like and had

only hoped she may see a picture of it someday on the network.

Ophelia looked up at Seraph. "Where are you taking me?" Nothing but indigo mists and darkness surrounded them.

"The Gardens."

"There's a garden in the afterlife? How can anything grow in the place where the dead reside?"

"You'll see." He tweaked her cheek. One hand kept coming back to touch her; the other still circled her wrist.

They walked for some time in silence before she began to question her surroundings. There was nothing but mist, and the harder she peered through it, the heavier it became.

*How does Seraph know where he's going?* They walked straight into it and he had yet to hesitate or change direction, but nothing appeared before them except more gloom. Sometimes she saw the outlines of others in the murk.

Ophelia looked behind her, past the floating lantern, and it was the same.

*No wonder he keeps my hand shackled to him. I would never find my way back.* Ophelia tightened her hold on his arm.

"How do you know where to go?" she asked quietly. She didn't know why but this place made her want to whisper.

"I focus on my destination and the ether guides me there. Time and distance is..." He hesitated for a moment. "Different here. We'll get there when we're meant to."

"What if we're not meant to?"

"Then we'll never arrive," he stated with no explanation.

Just as she was going to ask him another question, a glowing, golden string swam before them. It twisted and twirled as if it was caught in a delicate breeze, standing out amongst the quiet atmosphere. Seraph reached out and

pinched it between his fingers and brought it up to his eyes. Then under his nose.

*Is he smelling it? I want to smell it.*

"What is that?" she asked as he lifted it from his face.

"A memory. A nice one. Would you like to see it?" A *memory*? Seraph lifted it to her nose. "Smell it." She didn't need to, the essence so strong it filled her senses with the scent of freshly baked bread. Her eyes closed as she breathed it in, and when she opened them she was somewhere else.

She was still clinging to Seraph and he was still standing next to her, but now they were in an airy, wooden room of some kind. People—Earthians—were wandering about, and the entire space was filled with breads and countless baked goods. There was a lady at a counter in front of her, picking out choice breads behind a glass barrier. Someone on the other side was taking them out and packaging them upon request.

"What is this place?" She tugged her wrist free, enjoying the golden rays of sunlight coming through the large windows on the opposite side. Ophelia walked to a platter of some kind where others were taking pieces of biscuits, and reached to take one herself. The food felt amorphous and light between her fingers and slipped away with her attempt to remove it. She tried again but could not hold on to it.

"It's a bakery." He stepped up beside her. "You can't manipulate it, you don't have permission, nor is it your memory. When you die, we can revisit this place in your own mind and you can taste and touch everything."

"Really?" She brightened, running her hands through the cakes on another counter. "How will I know what they taste like?" She smiled at the thought.

"We'll come back together, always together, and I'll give everything a taste for you." He followed her around. *Just like a shadow*. She laughed.



"Can we visit more memories? Why was this floating around in the mist?" she asked as he grabbed her again, this time he held her hand.

"It was either forgotten or given up. Memories make up our souls and sometimes we want to groom them. Typically only memories that make us sad, or memories that are traumatic. The bad memories are often removed. It's the waste of the ether," as he said it, the memory vanished and the void returned. The smell of bread gone. "That one was nice but maybe it saddened the owner somehow and was left behind."

"You must have a lot of memories." She wrapped her arm around his again and looked behind her; the lantern was still there, and they continued walking.

"Countless. So many that, at a time, I was forgetting them in the ether. I only noticed after I encountered my own forgotten memory out here one day. It came back to me like a puzzle piece I never knew went missing. Now I take extra precaution so that that never happens again."

"Will you show me your memories?" She wanted to know him. Her heart swelled that any of this, all of this, was possible.

"Perhaps." He squeezed her hand. "Look up."

Ophelia lifted her eyes at his command, and as she focused on the mists above her, they began to open up. A black orb appeared far away in the sky. It looked like a round, beady pupil and she felt watched by it. Like it was looking at her, through her, knowing her on a level that she didn't even know herself.

It was monstrous and deeply beautiful as a champagne glow radiated from behind it, outlining its shape in such an exact way that it demanded reverence. Ophelia was equally intrigued and wary of its presence. She did not want to get closer to it.

"What is that?"

She didn't want to look but couldn't look away. It held her eyes like an invisible tether.

"It's the gate of The Great Above." He pulled her forward and every step loosened up the brume around them, the fogs receding. The lantern's glow was drowned out by the creamy-pink light from behind the orb.

"Where all things good go?"

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"*You* could say that." Seraph didn't look up at the blotch above them but kept them moving forward. He could just see their destination appear ahead. "Anything can pass through those gates, even if it doesn't call to them. Very rarely does something come back out."

"What comes out of them?"

"Beings that manage to venture their way in without dying first, beings that were never part of the physical realm, and beings that were born within the gates. I have only heard of them, I never cared to investigate." He rubbed the pad of his thumb over her wrist. "There are also the Draggers."

"Draggers?"

"Entities that roam the misty ether to capture wandering souls and drag them to a gate." His voice was low and ominous. He burst out laughing as her face fell and her breathing thinned. "Just stay with me and nothing will be able to touch you." He paused. "Unless you would like me to drag you?"

Her eyes widened as he grinned down at her. Seraph imagined her springing away from him, and he almost wished it, to be chased down in the dark. Dragging her body to the ground, shoving up her wispy shift, spreading her moonbeam thighs apart, and rutting into her.

A pretty pink blush painted her ghostly cheeks as he continued look at her. *She shares the same thoughts.* He ushered her forward and left the option open to her.

Ophelia's pace slowed as she looked back at the sky. He maneuvered to match her stride. "What if something truly evil walks through?" Her grip loosened on his arm. "Has something evil ever walked into paradise?"

"Is anything truly evil?" he asked numbly, not expecting an answer. He kept moving them forward.

"Yes."

Seraph stopped walking and turned to face her. He moved her chin until her gaze was pulled from the sky and directed at him. "What makes you say that?"

His curiosity was piqued. *Some would call me evil.*

"I've experienced it before." Ophelia shook her head. "Maybe not a person, but a gut reaction. I don't remember a person... but a tree? A feeling? I get these glimpses, nightmares, of a bloody tree. Lots of pain, consuming pain. And hatred. So much anger and hatred and pain that I want to hurt somebody else until it's passed on from me." She squinted her eyes and pulled her chin out of his grasp and looked away. "It's hard to explain."

"Do you feel evil when this happens?" Seraph shifted so her view of the Great Above remained behind him.

"Yes. It starves my heart, thinking about it. But then it goes away, it never stays."

"You're not evil." *Even if you sold your soul with those thoughts and feelings.*

"Then do you think I could pass through those gates someday?"

"No." He sighed internally.

"Why?"

Seraph leaned down until their eyes were leveled. His hands slipped around her head and scrunched her tousled bed hair with his fingers and held her firm. "Because I will never let you go."

"You wouldn't follow me?"

Her eyes widened as he leaned in and brushed his lips over hers.

"I would."

"Let's go now. Let's do it, let's go to paradise together."

Seraph nearly groaned as she pressed her lithe body up against his. He strained into her with insatiable lust. His fingers grabbed her shoulder blades and tugged her chest into his. Blush and heat bloomed as her tongue sought to mate with his.

He pulled back, alarmed, as her sentiment registered.

"Ophelia, is the gate calling you?" Desire mixed with fear. "Tell me if you feel a pull. NOW." His voice echoed through the ether and making her jump back. His hands twitched as he began to call his power to him.

"It's not! I don't know what a call would feel like. I just thought it would be nice." She looked up and gasped. "Seraph, it's gone. The gate is gone." Her hair in spider-web tangles around her face.

*Her mouth looks nice, rosy with rough kisses.*

He turned to look and smiled. *So it was.* He flexed his hand and leashed his power.

Without responding, he ushered her forward. *It hadn't been calling her, and if it had, it wouldn't have vanished.* The notion relaxed him. And with that thought, sparkles appeared in the distance.

She followed beside him but kept her gaze skyward. "Why would paradise vanish?"

"Maybe it was testing you. You should look ahead of you, not up. Something has appeared in its place." Seraph knew she had listened as her hand tensed in his grasp. "Ophelia, I don't know why the gates do anything. If it had been calling you, you would know. I find it very unlikely that it was."

"What is this place?" As they moved forward, sparkles blossomed from beneath their feet until they formed tiny glowing orbs in every hue and shade of blue and silver to

champagne and rose. They sprouted out like flowers until they detached and softly floated into the air. The farther he led her in, the denser the growth became. The more he imagined taking her amongst the sparkles.

"Welcome to the Gardens. Where souls enter the ether."

Seraph loosened his hold on her hand and she sprang away from him in awe. He felt a pang of envy that the beauty of the place lured her away from him. But his breath was equally lost as she lifted her hand to touch a shimmering bud just as it began to ascend from the ground. The glow of azure dressed her skin.

Her lips lifted into the most dazzling smile. Seraph was fixated as he placed every detail into a memory that he would forever keep close to his bleeding heart.

"It's so beautiful." She giggled. "Can I touch them? Will they know?" Ophelia hopped around, watching the murky ground, keeping her feet moving so she wouldn't step on a soul. He barked out in laughter as a stray sparkle floated up her skirts. She squeaked as she lifted her dress and pivoted away. He walked over to her in quick strides and lifted her in his arms.

"They will feel it but they won't know what they're feeling. Not the newly dead." Her ghostly skin flushed with rose as an alien soul floated up next to them. "The blue and silver souls are Earthian. The pink ones are Trentian." He nodded at the upward cascade. As she looked up at the floating waterfall, he leaned down and nuzzled her hair, breathing in her exotic scent. "There is a calm confusion at first. A realization of what has happened. Emotions, anger, regrets, loneliness, even happiness. Acceptance. Then the real journey begins. Many will live within their memories, some will travel to find love ones, most will be called to a gate." She squirmed and he let her down, once again being pulled away by beauty.

"What about the ones like you?" Ophelia walked back to him like she had forgotten his existence for a moment and

grabbed his hand. He clasped it like a lifeline.

"Beings who don't belong in paradise or the abyss, who value free will, who distrust what may be beyond those gates remain here. Good and evil and everything in between exists in the neutral, endless mists."

"Oh." He watched as she looked around, her body continuously glowed with different colors as souls sprung up around them. "I never thou—"

Seraph swung his arm out, quickly silencing her.

"Something is approaching."

He summoned his lantern into their sphere and coaxed the orb from within to splice and swirl around Ophelia's tense form. Her eyes confused as her mouth pursed to speak.

"Don't," he whispered. The lantern floated above her head so its light would illuminate her from every angle as he cajoled slithering beams to circle around her like a whirlpool.

It steadily advanced from a distance. He could sense it, feel it, even though he could barely see it. The disturbance of the floating souls was enough of an indication of its presence.

The creature itself wasn't a creature, but a beguiler. Seraph knew this, he knew what was approaching—had encountered them before. His weapons remained unsummoned, instead kept in stasis, the power low but ready. Just in case. He dropped his hands to his sides and loosened his fingers.

He would not show aggression with Ophelia behind him. The creature would have no reason to attack.

A snout appeared first, pushing its way through the colorful gardens. Souls flew behind in its wake. The thing was sickening to look at, and he was concerned if bringing Ophelia here was a mistake. He shifted his focus onto her. She was tense and quiet at his side and watching the creature with as much intensity as he had. No sound

escaped her lips, not even a breath. Only a modicum of fear emanated from her. It was mostly curiosity.

*She trusts me to protect her.* His fingers twitched. *I have her trust.*

The creature was a malformed man and it stopped several yards before the two of them. The body was disjointed and crooked. It resembled a broken corpse. Its decaying arms sat before it as it crawled. The tight skin had a sickly pallor and the head that sat on its neck was much too large for its body. The snout extended outward by several feet and was a jarring cross between a horse and a dog. The nostrils flared as it breathed in their scent—drool covered gums that were pulled taut by enlarged, jagged incisors.

As they stood there staring at each other, the wet muck fell from its mouth to puddle on the ground.

“Hello, Seraph.” Its voice was low and cracked.

“Acheron,” he responded in greeting. The creature tilted its head and leered at him.

“You have not left your domain for many years.” A tongue flicked out and licked a nearby blossoming soul. Seraph watched as the orb shuttered in unknown revulsion.

“I had no reason to.” He cocked his head. “Why? Were you keeping track of me?” The filth kept licking at the spirit as it replied, its elongated tongue followed it as it floated away.

“There’s not many of you Collectors left. It’s easy to keep track of those who refuse to move on.”

“Where have the others gone?” Seraph’s eyes followed as the molested soul finally reached a high enough altitude to be out of Acheron’s grasp.

“Oh, here and there. I will tell you for a taste.” Brown spittle spat out of its mouth. “I want a taste.” The smell of sour, unwashed skin permeated the air. The creature briefly shifted its eyes to look at Ophelia, and just as he moved to stand between them, it began to seizure and transform.

Acheron convulsed several times before he lifted his head in an explosive roar. The long, toothy jaws split open and a hand shot up out of its throat. Gristle ensued, followed by the gut wrenching sounds of ripping, chipping, and the slosh of spilt body fluids. A naked woman tore her way out of the throat of the devourer.

She moved closer to him and clutched his hand.

*Sweet Ophelia, if you hold on to me, my weapons are shackled.* Seraph couldn't bring himself to disengage from her. He could sense her flinch in horror at the gory scene taking place in front of them.

The destroyed body of the monster sank into the ground. It left a bruise over the garden and no sparkles sprouted out around it.

Before them now stood a stunning, seemingly vulnerable young woman. She shook as if she were cold or scared, or both. Her delicate hands rubbed at her skin until the gore fell off. Her palms illuminated with a blush light as her body cleansed itself. Long, wet, ruby hair plastered to her perfected feminine form to frame rounded, perky breasts. The scent of musk and lavender replaced the sour stench from before.

*Acheron means to bait me with the promise of sex*, Seraph cackled internally at the displeasing prospect.

His eyes shot downward as Ophelia let go of his hand and stepped forward, entranced by the illusion. He grabbed the back of her nightgown and pulled her back.

"You're going nowhere." He held onto her.

She didn't acknowledge him and addressed the monster. "You're so beautiful," she breathed.

Acheron, the manipulator, smiled shyly with simmering eyes and bowed her head. "Thank you." The beast hugged its form. "Come here, sweet alien, and keep me warm."

"What do you want, Acheron? Why are you really here?" Seraph's hold on Ophelia tightened.



The red-headed witch looked around and smirked. "I'm actually here for the souls." She spun in a circle and the orbs began to gravitate toward her. "They can't resist me. Men love a vulnerable female." She caught one in her hand and stroked it with her fingertips. "Especially the aliens."

"Ah, so you really fell from grace and became a deceiver."

She stabbed him with an insidious glare. "I'm a Contractor, Seraph, there is a difference. You'd do well to remember that."

*I don't care.* "What do you know of the other Collectors?" he asked again.

The naked illusion released the soul in her hand. "For a taste, angel."

Ophelia shifted and looked up at him, her forehead creased in worry. "What does she mean by that?"

"It..." Seraph corrected. "Wants a sip of my collective mana."

"I would accept a little time with your alien, if you're going to be such a miser with your magic." Acheron simpered and beckoned Ophelia.

"Enough!" He tossed the monster a pebble. A hand shot out and caught the ball with lightning reflexes just as it uncoiled into a silvery string. The red-headed, self-proclaimed contractor beamed. Acheron tilted her head back and swallowed the string, wiggling and whole. Seraph watched in disgust as her belly distended as his knowledge infused her.

The female shivered and licked her lips. "Delicious," she murmured.

"What did you give her-it?" Ophelia asked softly.

"Knowledge. Acheron's power will bolster with a piece of a Soul Collector's collective memory." He ran his hand up Ophelia's back until his hand clasped her neck.

They stared at the writhing woman, watching as dozens of souls floated toward her, running along her naked skin. It

was dangerously beautiful, deadly manipulative, and he felt sorry for the gullible souls—mainly men who were caught in Acheron's enchantment.

"I wish I had ruby hair." A longing whisper reached him.

"That female is just a perfected illusion. The beast-headed monstrosity you saw before more accurately defines Acheron's true form, maligned with age and dubious intentions." Seraph looked down at her and the swirls that protected her. The blue that shined off her loose locks. "Your hair is far more beautiful. It glistens like raven's wings and is tinted with midnight purple in the light. It soaks up moonbeams at night."

Her gaze broke away from the creature and locked with his. His heart constricted as she smiled and pressed against him, burrowing her head into his chest.

"You rhymed, like a poem, about my hair," she murmured. The lantern's light expanded to envelope both of them. His lips tugged up in a soft smile.

Acheron appeared next to them, startling Ophelia and making her jerk backward. Seraph stepped between them. It wasn't lost on him that the female's hair dripped down like a bleeding wound over her body. Like red dye or blood that trickled over her soft curves, outlining them to any onlooker's gaze. The illusion pushed off her vulnerable aura, no doubt to entice him, her skin blush with heat.

"The other Collectors?" he hissed, the smile gone, wanting to get him and Ophelia away.

Acheron leered and pursed her mouth. "There are no more souls to collect. Most of them realized this after the aliens arrived, and moved on."

"To where?"

A pale, bloodless tongue licked her dewy lips. "The alien are delicious." Acheron's eyes shifted to Ophelia. "They began to eat them when it was apparent they could control them no other way. They taste like ambrosia and red wine. Fresh earth and mint. New yet aged."

Seraph felt Ophelia's hands tangle into the back of his jacket.

"Soul Eaters," he spat.

"Everyone will know you managed to collect one, Seraph. They will talk. They will know you brought a live one here." Acheron turned around and nuzzled the souls behind her. The contractor walked away with her new worshippers trailing. When her body vanished in the foggy distance, he turned to Ophelia. Her eyes were wide and glazed.

"Are you okay?" Seraph asked, running his fingers through her hair.

"She was very beautiful."

Seraph's mouth watered and he hardened when her lust perfumed the air. Her nipples pebbled beneath her shift as a creamy blush crept over her skin. He went rigid as her nails bit through his silk shirt and into his skin. The dead began to drift toward her now and his eyes narrowed with possession.

A damning whisper slithered over his ear, and Acheron's amused voice filled his head. "Claim her before someone else does. She's quivering under her skirts, ready to be penetrated by you." Her evil laughter followed. "Take back the innocence for which she sold her soul to you." Seraph's ears popped and the voice was gone. His hands clenched.

Ophelia moved closer and slid into his chest, breathing him in with deep inhales. His arms wrapped around her enchanted form and held her close. The lantern's light returned to normal as he snaked his magic over her body and released her from Acheron's sensuality.

Tension seeped out of her and he could tell exhaustion had quickly replaced her desire. Seraph entwined them in shadows and delivered her back to the commune. She fell onto the bed in a heap and curled up into a ball.

"I'm scared."

He kneeled down to catch her eyes.

“Why?”

“The creature. I wanted it and I hated it all the same.” She pulled the blanket up until she was hidden within. “Will you come back tomorrow night?”

“You know I will.” Her smile brightened up his troubled thoughts and he leaned down and kissed her. “Ophelia, the only thing you should be afraid of is me.”

Ophelia moved to the side of her cot. “Lie with me?”

He eyed her skeptically, wondering if Acheron’s mischief remained... but he could sense nothing but his tether to her and their mixed scents. In quick movements he stripped off his leather to just his silk and his shadows. He became a man again and slid into her bed, maneuvering her pliant body against his. *Heaven.*

“Why should I be afraid of you?”

Seraph paused, deciding whether he should answer with the truth. “Because... I will take away your freedom.” He was graced with a light-hearted giggle.

“Shadows can’t take away their master’s freedom. If anything, I will be taking away yours.” She sighed into his arms. “Good night, Seraph.” She drifted off with a small smile and he lay there in the dark of her room, watching her, threading her hair, and hiding within the shadows until the moon fell away.

She woke up with a start, well rested with a pounding heart. Her feet hit the floor as she did her customary scan of the room.

*I know he's not here. I can't help myself.*

The light was brightening through the single window of her room; morning was just beginning. As she stared at the airy rays, the night came back to her. Seraph came back to her. Ophelia reached up, found the rip in her nightgown and smiled. Her fingers absently traced the frayed cloth.

She rushed to her chest and pulled out a fresh sheath and dress for the day, and buried the ripped one at the bottom. Quickly, she headed to the bathing pools only to run head first into Allie on her way out of the dormitory.

"Ophelia! Where have you been?" White fingers dug into her arm.

"I've been in my room," she gasped as her friend pulled her to the side and inspected her.

"I checked on you last night and you weren't there." Allie clutched her in worry, "I couldn't find you."

*I need to be more careful.* Her arms wrapped around her friend. "I'm okay. Why did you check on me?" Ophelia asked as they descended the stairs to the baths.

"I always check on you... You sleepwalk and you have terrible nightmares." Allie hesitated as if she was going to say more but didn't. Several other maidens were already bathing when they arrived. Ophelia had never come here alone before, wary of Seraph appearing while she was naked, but now she was wary of being here with other naked girls.

Jealousy flared.

*He has never appeared before, so he wouldn't now. There is no place for him to hide here.* And for a moment, as she slipped from her dress, she wished he was watching.

Ophelia dunked under the cold waters and scrubbed herself with scentless soap. Other girls came and went, getting ready for another day. Allie settled in next to her, still clothed, hiding her alienness from the others.

"You don't have to check on me. I'll be fine."

"It makes me feel better."

"Why?"

Allie sighed. "Because you're the only friend I have and I care about you. Maybe it's because you're the only thing I have to care about. I don't want to see you get hurt." Her dress billowed in the water.

"I don't want to see you hurt either." They were whispering. Romana appeared and Ophelia, filled with curiosity, watched her enter the pools on the other side of the room. *I need to talk to her. She's been here the longest now.*

Allie followed her gaze. "Is something wrong?"

Ophelia gnawed her lip and looked around the room again just for measure. "Do you know anything about mating?"

Allie's hands stopped moving, the fingers cinching the excess water out of her hair stilled. "Why?" Her eyes widened. "I only know what the elders have told us."

"My male is out there right now, fighting for the right to my body," Ophelia alluded. "...for the future children we will

create together." She lied. Her friend looked at her with blatant suspicion.

"Do you think Romana will know?" They both looked back to the alien girl on the other side of the room.

"Maybe. I don't know. Ophelia, have you changed your mind?"

She ignored her question. "What's her routine? Duties?" Eager now, her pulse quaked with paranoia, unsure if *he* was listening.

Allie moved closer. "Why do you want to know about it? There are no men here. It's impossible to breach the commune." Ophelia shook her head. *No, it's not.*

Her friend pushed her dress back under the water. "Our mate is supposed to teach us how to make babies. The elders are the only ones with that knowledge here."

"I'm just," she peered around the room, "curious."

Allie looked back over at Romana. "She works with mechanical maintenance. She helps maintain our defense systems with the crones."

"Thank you, Allie."

Ophelia got up and dried off, leaving Allie perplexed in the water.

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Later that day, Ophelia hurried through her routine chores, cultivating, harvesting, and weeding the gardens. She was caked in dirt from her clumsy efforts to get through everything while the sun was still bright. The looming conversation consumed her and she found herself reminding her body to breathe. Ophelia looked up at the sky, hating the light but wanting it to stay all the same.

Below the main building, down the passageways, deep within the catacombs of the ward, she finally found Romana. Her pearly-white lilac hair glowed amongst the

neon lights of the machinery, her body hunched over, kneeling on the ruddy ground, scrubbing at steel plates, her face drenched in sweat and soil. Grease smudges dirtied her cheeks, arms, and her hands with a grimy brown paste.

Ophelia surveyed her surroundings. *Deep shadows, too many deep shadows... and no natural light. Hiding places behind the servers, machines, and broken down drones. I've never been down here before.* She nearly lost her nerve. The room was a predicament and a challenge she wasn't sure if she wanted to face.

She took a deep breath and approached softly. "Romana, can I talk with you?"

The girl looked up with curiosity and annoyance. "No."

"Please," she begged.

Romana looked up at her again and stared. Seeming to come to a conclusion that worked for Ophelia, she gestured to her to sit. "Help me with the plates. They need to glisten to catch the sun."

Ophelia tied her skirts up and sat on the dusty ground. She watched the other maiden for a moment before she picked an unpolished one up and mimicked her. Her fingers balled up a clump of steel wool. Flakes of rust fell away and landed on her lap.

They sat in tense, companionable silence as they worked through the task. She glanced at the other girl and wondered, for the first time, why she had never approached her before.

Romana was an angled female. She was every edge a sharp and fragmented shape. Ophelia found herself comparing the girl to the beautiful beguiler from her dream world. They were different in every way. Romana was transparent where Acheron had layers. Soft, evil, luxurious layers.

Heat flooded her face as she thought about the red-headed monster and she looked around anxiously. *Paranoia.*



Focusing on her surroundings, especially the dark corners, had become a debilitating habit.

*Why am I in here?*

"Looking for something?" Romana mumbled with her lip between her teeth. Pale lips, pale eyes, pale hair. Everything about the Trentian purebred was unnerving shades of pale—with even paler colors. She assessed the maiden now as a rival and glimpses of Acheron clouded her vision. "Not going to answer me? Fine."

She wanted the truth, so she would tell her the truth. Something in her gut encouraged her but she couldn't place it. Ophelia didn't want layers, she wanted transparency. "I am. That is, I am looking for something."

*Why do I see Acheron when I look at Romana?*

That caught the girl's attention. Romana peered at her as if she was sizing her up. *I'm transparent. Find me transparent.* Ophelia didn't know why she was fixated on it, but she knew Acheron had something to do with it. Like a waking nightmare.

Whatever her maiden-sister decided, the girl broke her stare and perused the machine room herself. "What are you always looking for?"

"A man...my shadow."

"You see a man in the shadows?" Romana's hands stopped as if her concentration drifted.

"Yes."

"I've seen him too—"

Ophelia's throat constricted. It suddenly became too difficult to breathe.

"—Does that surprise you?" The girl picked up a fresh disc of metal and started anew.

Ophelia's heart pounded and it sounded like thunder in her ears. *Yes. No. Yes.*

"Yes." And when a rocking clarity infused her, her heart calmed in her chest. For the first time, she could look at the situation from a different angle. Yet wariness and a spine-

chilling concern continued to cloud her thoughts. "When have you seen him?"

Romana tilted her head in thought. "He's only ever around when it's dark. Outside under the trees." She looked around the room. "When you're around. The daeva-shade only appeared after you arrived."

"But you have seen him?" Ophelia asked again, numbly, needing clarification. Romana's jaw ticked.

"Yes. Only the devout to Xanteaus would."

Ophelia squeezed her eyes closed and rubbed her head. *Seraph never shows himself, it's always sporadic and private. I wish I could remember what he won't tell me.* "No one said anything." Her voice was strained.

The other girl sneered, "You've chosen the company of a filthy heater. Did you know? No one told you, did they? That the priests were all found butchered just after you arrived here? Their hearts and loins separated from their bodies." Ophelia shook her head in confusion. "The priests are *eunuchs*, they don't have sex organs. But they did and now they don't. And you showed up here, delirious, right before the slaughter. And I heard you bled, you bled so much that the crones didn't think you would make it." Romana sighed with barely contained rage, "If you listen closely, you can hear gun fire at night."

"I didn't know." A sharp stabbing pain speared between her legs. *Blood soaking into soil.*

"I'm glad those beasts are dead. I'm glad the men are killing each other outside our walls. If the demon in the shadows has anything to do with it, I'm indifferent to it. Thank Xanteaus for sending its protector to us, so many miles away from Trent."

"I don't think that's it. I don't think he's from Xanteaus at all."

"Where else—" Romana's eyes narrowed. "Xanteaus and its council rules here. Even if we are forgotten," she hissed.

Ophelia found herself grinding her teeth, knowing where the subject would turn, where it always turned. "Allie is my friend."

Her sister-maiden slammed the metal plate she was holding onto the ground. The thunderous clang of metal barraged her ears. "They killed billions of us." Her voice menacing and strained. "Billions of unborn children will remain unborn because of her people."

"You can't blame an entire war and a genocide of those who have not been conceived on one girl," Ophelia raged back. "Allie is suffering."

"Let her suffer. I hope she suffers enough that there will be none left for the rest of us."

"Romana, please."

"There is a child here!" She screamed. "A girl barely old enough to be an adolescent." Romana seethed with the admission. "They raped her with a fertility test. A *child* ." The maiden shook and held back a sob; Ophelia watched as Romana gulped it down like swallowing glass.

Her heart constricted, for the harrowing pain in Romana's voice, for the sparkle of tears that trickled from her eyes, and for the girl-maiden she knew Romana was grieving about.

Her heart released because Seraph's presence appeared; he was nearby.

"I know," Ophelia whispered painfully. Neither girl spoke as their throats tightened from the distress. After several minutes of horror, Romana wiped her grease covered hands on her skirts.

"Allie will, without a doubt, bear children." She breathed in numb acceptance. "She does not live with the terror that the tests could have been wrong. And for that, for her people, and the child amongst us, I cannot forgive what she is." She wiped the tears off of her cheeks. "The sight of her brings forth too much hate."

"I love her, Romana. I will never choose sides."

“How could you? You’re a half-breed, there is no side for you.”

And Ophelia knew. She knew what Seraph meant about the gate not calling her. Why she would never be called to a gate. She was a middling creature, firmly stuck in the nebulous buffer between both worlds. She gripped a strand of her black hair and looked at it against her white Trentian skin and shook.

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Seraph crouched, hidden in the corner, and watched the exchange. First out of curiosity—Ophelia was never with anyone but the Earth girl—but now he watched with apprehension. Had he missed something?

Her eyes were absent, wide with stark realization. *What is in her head? Why am I not in her head?*

He rubbed his fingers together, fist clenched.

The other girl picked up the glistening copper-metal plates from the floor and stacked them on a stilted table. Ophelia remained stunned on the floor.

When the alien turned, her face was blank but smudged with streaks of grease and dried tears. “What did you want to talk with me about?”

Seraph’s curiosity piqued but he heard barely a whisper in reply.

“Nothing.” The girls stared at each other for a tense moment before the alien walked away, leaving him alone with Ophelia in the stifling mechanical dark.

He was by her side the next moment. His hands cupped her face. “Are you oka—”

“Go away!” she cried. “You’re not real.”

Shock. His skull shattered with pain.

He was ripped out of her world with a deafening speed that tore the air out of his lungs.

Seraph dropped to his knees, the impact cracked the foundation. He clutched his head as a screeching hum filled his ears, and try as he might, he could not will it away. His hands were engulfed in silver as he injected himself with his power over and over, only weakening himself further.

*Why did she banish me?* His agony turned to confusion before it became all-consuming rage. Boiling hot rage that lit his mana afire and turned it black.

*I am real.*

He lifted his head up and ground his teeth as a rush of adrenaline flooded his body. Before him wasn't his throne, but the giant craggy tunnel that covered the treacherous path to the Great Below. His rage had brought him to the one place where it belonged.

Beyond that broken pathway, down a thousand jagged steps, through elements of fire and ice lay a gaping abyss. And like warped tunnel vision, Seraph was pulled to the end of the path and in front of the gate. It towered over him in an endless, depthless stygian void, sucking the mists of the ether in like a black hole.

He clenched his hand and cursed Ophelia, then himself for letting his need for her cloud his intellect. *I should have*

*never allowed her to have the power to banish me.*

*There are ways. And I'm not an honorable enough man to not utilize them.* Seraph squeezed the ethereal-energy of his power, feeling the abrupt shakes and shudders of countless others, taking his anger out on those who belonged to him and shared his hate.

As he kneeled there, his teeth bared in fury, several wayward souls floated by him and were swallowed up by the voracious black throat. The song in his head scraped at his thoughts like a scalpel.

A foreign presence caught his attention. His spear stretched and formed in his hand as a being approached from behind, down the broken stairs, and stopped next to him.

Seraph stood in anticipation but the other male made no move to attack. Neither of them made eye contact as the pull from the gate kept them staring forward. If he looked hard enough, concentrated on the impenetrable evil veil, he could see movements beyond. The flick of a giant tail, a serpent that could swallow worlds.

He had never seen anything appear before, though he had looked into the void in the past, and attributed it to the song in his head. *And Ophelia*. Seraph could taste Hell in his mouth when all he wanted to taste was *her*.

The stranger humphed, "That's some snake."

The hum in his head muted as the being next to him shuffled with something on his hip. The Gate seemed to fade into the back of his mind as he pulled his eyes away and looked at the stranger, intrigued.

The man didn't have a soul.

"Who are you?" His anger simmered and his spear vanished. It wouldn't harm the soulless.

"Name's Lysander, and I've been wandering these mists for fifty-something odd years, give or take."

Seraph's interest diverted from Ophelia and the Gate, and he could almost feel a waft of irritation as if Hell knew it

was being ignored.

"Are you heading into the hole?" He didn't know why, but he was curious about this being; the call had completely fizzled out like an electrical impulse.

"Thinking about it. Heaven spat me out." He mumbled something about a feast. "But I think my feet led me to you. Not to Hell."

Seraph really looked at the stranger now, gauging if he was another beguiler, one with new tricks. *Heaven spat him out? A liar?* But he had no soul, and he was physical.

The man, Lysander, was a juggernaut of a man, or part man. He was imposing in a large mechanized metal suit, and when he caught his eyes, they flashed like red neon orbs. His body armor was thrice the size of the soulless body hidden beneath and wired with heavy metalloids, kevlar, and other materials he knew nothing about. Chrome cannons were strapped to his back.

The techno-beast reminded him of the artificial digital world Ophelia inhabited and his eyes narrowed in vengeance.

"You don't have a soul."

"You really know how to make friends."

"I collect souls. If you plan to strike a bargain with me, a soul would be imperative to have."

"Yeah, well." The machine-man shifted. "Figured as much. The rest of you Collectors said the same thing."

That caught Seraph's attention. "You've seen the others?"

"Not for quite some time. You're the first in-oh, maybe ten years. If my calculations are correct. But, like I said, went to heaven for a while and time stopped calculating there." The mechanical warrior rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth. "Not going to lie. I'm pretty desperate to get out of here." He looked at the black gate. "Even considering taking on that snake in there. Is there anything else I can bargain with?"

Seraph thought about it, intrigued; change was happening faster than he thought. *I had bargained for other things...* but his interactions with Ophelia were special, perverse, and... private.

"What do you want? Exactly?"

"In layman's terms, to get the fuck out of purgatory and back to the physical world." Hope lightened Lysander's voice.

Seraph sighed—because the machine felt more real than anything else in the mists, but he couldn't help him. He couldn't bring the dead back to life, even a soulless dead. Before he could respond, Lysander broke him off.

"I already see my answer in your eyes. It was worth a try." The half-machine, half-man said, clicking his visor in place, his face now distorted behind a crystalline silver shield. He began to walk toward Hell.

"Lysander," Seraph called after him. "Find yourself a soul. Then come find me."

"Roger that." The juggernaut pulled a cannon from his back and cocked the weapon, just as Seraph lost sight of him beyond Hell's mouth. He was gone as quickly as he had arrived.

Seraph took a deep breath. The music was gone. His head was clear and he found himself back before his throne with renewed clarity. He grabbed his lantern and got to work.

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*H*e pulled his vibrant orb from the lantern. The silver mass left a numb, shivering feeling in his hand. But as he inspected it, rolled it between his fingers, Seraph only saw the tiniest veins of corruption dotting it. It wasn't infected enough to alarm him but it was noticeable and



exacting in its meaning, and that meaning had consequences.

Or opportunities if one was so inclined that way.

As he rolled his sphere back and forth, he smoothed it, rounded it, stroked it, and his mind wandered back to Ophelia. He mentally tried to link his aura back to hers but the connection remained lost. He hit a metaphysical brick wall and it left him feeling as empty and infinite as the ether. The endless, haunting, and shaded unknowability of the future.

He tried again out of spite but not even a wisp could be felt, only the faint trace of her presence within his halls and the memories he had preserved were found.

Ophelia had truly exiled him from her life. The stunned vehemence of her demand hit him full force and he squeezed the soul in his grip. *What had she and the alien girl talked about?* His emotions darkened and he looked down to see his fingers, now tipped with decaying claws, digging into the precious essence in his hand.

Seraph loosened his grip and massaged the punctures away with his thumb, immediately feeling better. *I wonder what her vulnerable life-force would feel like clutched in my grasp.* He smirked.

With unveiled interest, he reached into the lapel of his jacket and pulled out the memories he had stolen from her when she had bargained for a better life. He had granted her the only life possible for her on that disgustingly backward world. The memories coiled around his fingers like warm, wet string.

He pulled them apart and brought them before an unused bench, placed the strings separately before him and watched them wiggle. His nails drummed on the table.

One was of their bargain beneath the crimson tree.

One was of her flight through the twilight forest.

And the third one was of her rape. His eyes dwelled on that one.

He had invaded all three after their contract solidified and the tether had been formed, needing to know what had to be changed on his part.

Seraph summoned his now vacant lantern and placed his silvery soul next to it. He picked up the first memory and fed it into himself, sniffing it right before it was fully consumed. The memory smelled of death.

He took the second memory and held it to his nose, briefly reliving her flight and her thoughts as she ran in paranoid abandon. He could feel her fear and the pain that bled from her wounds.

Pulling the unfortunate string away from his face, Seraph flicked it into the mists, watching it ascend until it was out of sight. Now more waste than memory.

Then he turned his attention to the black string. It dripped with imaginary blood but glowed with speckles of innocence beneath. An innocence lost within the dregs.

He didn't know why at the time but he had latched onto her alien spirit like a parasite. *A starving, obsessive leech.* Ophelia was the fate his mind had hinted at when the alien souls appeared in the mists. She was the first real thing he had encountered in centuries. She had brought him back to life.

Seraph scowled at the damning memory. The crux that had brought them together. He would not smell it again.

He had already slaughtered every being within and to his rage, none of their souls had appeared in the gardens. He would have liked to manipulate them into Acheron's predatory grasp. *I would have liked to tear their souls to shreds.*

He had lost a lot that day.

Seraph pinched the wiggling worm between his fingers and destroyed it. *She will never know.*

After he watched the memory disintegrate into a dusty mist, feeling no remorse in destroying a small part of her

being—it was, after all, his now. He focused his attention back on his orb.

Seraph pulled a little piece and tore it from the main mass.

A feeling of forgetfulness and nausea wrenched his stomach as he rounded the swirl into a tiny ball between his fingers. After a time, perfecting the shape, he inspected his work with an intensity he only used when he watched Ophelia. Seraph checked the gem over a dozen times, making sure none of his corruption was pulled into it.

Unconsciously, he placed his hand over his torn anima and caressed it, comforting himself from the sacrifice to his being. But his anger fueled him. His frustration chilled his heart and he knew he would bind himself to her beyond their bargain.

*Ophelia will not banish me again.*

Seraph solidified the jewel in his grip until it became a physical object, until it resembled a deep sapphire stone. A precious stone that had been mined out ages ago. And with a bracket of his lantern, he fashioned a transparent band.

When he was done, he placed his essence back into its protective cage and ordered it to his throne, following behind it.

Seraph fell into his eternal seat with the bauble pressed against his lips and waited.

He was very good at waiting.

Ophelia numbly got up from the gardens, disregarding her tools, and walked to her room. Like a mindless machine, not even noticing the sun setting behind her, she grabbed a fresh night shift and headed down to the baths. The smell of dirt and flora clung to her.

She passed Romana in silence as she dipped below the cooling waters and tried, for the dozenth time, to wash everything away.

She held her breath and watched her long black hair float around her. *He rhymed my hair once .*

*Slithering snakes and ink so long,  
Onyx black and sludge was born,  
To fall in strands like silk so strong,  
With grasping hands it was tugged and torn.*

Ophelia felt the ghost of a smile touch her lips as she pulled at her hair and cleaned it. By the time she emerged, night had descended upon the ward. Seraph was gone, torn like the hair from her poem, and he had not reappeared. She crawled her way into bed and closed her eyes, letting exhaustion drift her away.

And it was then, as her body finally succumbed to sleep, she heard the pops of gunfire. Ophelia giggled hysterically. Summoned by her conversation with Romana, her feet hit

the ground. A moment later she was at the window and looking out. A breeze blew in and plastered her thin dress to her body—but she didn't shiver because her body was as numb as her mind.

Everything was quiet, dark, stifled. So quiet that she knew others around her were also holding their breaths. The silver moon watched from above with only a stray wisp of cloud to contend with.

It was so quiet, the focus so intense, the silence deafened her ears. Her senses shifted to accommodate.

Far beyond the wall, three shots blasted through her trance like a shock of lightning and a guttural, animal scream filled the vacuous space.

*Monsters.*

Ophelia clasped her arms around herself as all her senses rushed back at once. The breeze prickled her skin with needle-like goosebumps.

The subtle hum of the turrets powered on and the subsequent, predicted clicks followed. Click... Click... Click... as the barrels moved back and forth in a half-moon motion.

The door behind her knocked open and she could hear Allie's telltale footsteps move to join her at the window. Her room overlooked the courtyard and beyond the gardens and trees, the gate could be seen.

*Crossing our gate would be like crossing into Hell.*

Her friend's room was on the ground floor, close to the machines, and it overlooked nothing. Even the crones would not elevate an Earthian to one of the many empty, better rooms.

They watched in silence as several of the hags walked out of the elder's adjoining building and toward the gate. They looked like ghouls hunched over in the moonlight and the scene made her shiver. Several maidens appeared and joined them in the courtyard.

She and Allie shared a look and, in silent agreement, headed down into the moonlit enclosure, their steps in sync with the ominous clicks of the circling turrets.

When they made it down, everyone was beyond the garden and before the gate, all of them quiet and listening. Intermittent gunfire pierced the silence but the noise had yet to move closer to their structure. No one spoke but everyone twitched in anticipation. Her eyes shifted back and forth from the solid metal gate to the turrets.

The stationary guns pointed in the same direction all at once, at something or someone just beyond the wall. One of the hags motioned to another and they disappeared.

She didn't watch them walk away.

A screeching call echoed through the night. The type of call a man would make who wanted to impersonate a frenzied animal. Several other rasping, wild screeches followed soon after when a motorbike revved up faintly in the distance. Rabid hoots and cheers mixed with the zip of laser fire as the bike grew louder.

One of the elders approached the wall and began to ascend the crooked staircase just as something thunderous and mechanized crashed into the doors from the other side.

Ophelia jerked back. The impact shattered with a scream from the other side, and the wails of someone dying a most painful death overtook the weaponry.

The turrets targeted and barraged the wailing creature with a dozen bullets and the man became a silent corpse. The deafening impact rang in her ears while the smell of hot metal and blood drifted in the breeze.

Ophelia looked around her for the first time that night for Seraph but he was chillingly absent. She was nervous to call him back even though it was her anxious desire.

*Would he even come back?* She closed her eyes.

The crush of metal and the hum of a broken engine could be heard right beyond the doors. The crone on the steps opened up a slat and peered out. The guns on the walls

continued to aim but the shooting had stopped. Ophelia tightened her arms around herself and rubbed the anxiety out of her skin.

The gate held.

After several minutes and nothing else happening, the elder gingerly climbed down the crooked gate steps and spoke to another crone. Together they looked out over the frightened, expectant maidens. Ophelia dropped her gaze before she caught the hag's eyes.

The Elders left without a word. Everyone followed soon after.

She tried to forget about the dead man beyond her sight and it was then, walking back with Allie, that she noticed that the drones had doubled in numbers. They swarmed in the skies above her head like flies over a carcass.

A short time later, she and Allie crawled into her bed together, keeping the fear of invasion at bay.

*Seraph had been right. It had only been a temporary fix. And it is only a matter of time now. Maybe I should have let him kill them.* Ophelia tried not to think of him, because when her mind wandered in his direction, she could feel his rage, vengeance, and... lust envelop her. And it frightened her. *I shouldn't have sent him away. My heart hurts and I'm so confused.*

*So confused.*

She curled herself into Allie's sleeping form.

Space was what she needed most at that moment without the paranoia of him watching her. Ophelia couldn't help but feel a trapped in a net, awaiting a gruesome, toothy monster that would consume her being.

She burrowed her face into Allie's arm and selfishly wished that it was Seraph with her instead. And right when she drifted off to sleep, she felt familiar claw-tipped fingers brush through her hair.

"Seraph," she breathed in her dreams.

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Ophelia started awake as a hand slapped her haphazardly across her face. Allie tousled up with an apology as a crone barged through the door. She and Allie stood to attention and she saw her friend peak white and straighten out her dress.

"Be in the hall in two hands," the crone croaked in that awful voice. She rammed her cane into the ground once before turning and leaving the room.

She and Allie quickly dressed. "Do you think it's about last night?"

"It has to be."

"Are you scared?"

Allie scrubbed at her face until it was pink and the just-woke-up look had vanished. "Yes... but I believe the walls will hold and the droids will protect us." She turned and met her eyes. "The Warlord will protect us. The warriors would have arrived already if the outlaws had any chance of sieging this place. They can't even get within the periphery without the machines initiating." Her voice hitched and there was a hint of unease layered beneath. "But if they did make it through the walls..."

Ophelia felt that stabbing ache between her legs at the words. "If they get in, they won't kill us."

"No they won't but they *will* hurt us."

The conversation died as apprehension and the inevitable led their feet to the hall. A dozen of the other maidens and several elders were already there waiting.

On a table, central to the room, a half a hundred firearms sat in foreboding anticipation. Several of her sister-mates already had one in hand.

Her thoughts turned grim. *At least we'll be prepared this time.*



She noticed Allie move away from the others and hide amongst the shadows in the back of the room. Ophelia stopped herself from following and instead her eyes drifted over the darkened corners. She knew he wouldn't be there, and her face fell when she met Romana's eyes. They stared at each other in tense silence while the rest of the females filtered into the dull, dusty room.

Ophelia tore her eyes away and looked at the other girls. She looked at the guns, and realized the enormity of what was happening: they were raising the defenses. *We're going to be armed.*

*I have the best protection of all. My insanity.*

She drew in a breath, even though she knew Romana was still watching her, and willed Seraph to come back to her. And when he didn't immediately appear, hearing her internal, struggling summons - her heart bled. *I should have called him earlier.* Tears formed on her eyelashes at her selfish ineptitude. At her stress. And her fear.

But then she felt him. And she could breathe again. Ophelia's fingers tensed and she wanted to claw at herself for her stupidity, to bleed it out of her like her heavy heart.

She warred with herself to find Allie and go to the shadows with her, or to stay within the center next to the guns. Romana's leer answered for her and she chose to stay. But she could feel his eyes stabbing at her with angry frustration and it wound her up even tighter.

*I can't face him yet.* Her eyes settled on the guns. Being armed would give her more courage.

The crone with the brass cane entered then. She stomped it thrice on the floor to gather everyone's attention. Ophelia braced herself for that sandpaper voice. The sounds of twitching, shifting, and shuffling—along with the scent of apprehensive sweat—filled the room.

Allie was tugging her hair in the corner; she chose not to look beyond.

The elder cleared her throat, "Every one of you will be equipped with a gun before you leave this room." Every pair of eyes in the room fell on the myriad of metal displayed on the table. "We have a job to do today, girls. And it will take a small amount of courage to do it." The hag's voice grated like gravel. "We're going to open the gate to our ward and collect the debris from the other side." An oppressive hush fell over the room. The crone hobbled to stand next to another elder, flanked by her two sentinel droids.

The other woman spoke up, "We all heard it last night. A motorbike drove into our door, we were attacked." Ophelia looked back to the guns next to her. "And now there is a corpse before our gate and that corpse is going to rot. But more importantly, that body has the markings of one of the Warlord's warriors." She nodded to the table of weapons. "We don't know what awaits us outside that gate. This is beyond protocol but with the ever-present warring outside of our walls we can't remain ignorant." She walked over to the table and lifted a gun. "All communication has been lost since the marriage of our sister-maidens."

Ophelia's skin prickled with fear for her sisters. She had not thought about them since...

"We do not want to risk the lives of our sisters and daughters, but our resources have been cut off for weeks." The hive mind came back and everyone met each other's eyes. "Our communication has been cut off since the mating ritual. The guns on the table are a cache we have hidden for this very purpose. When the walls can no longer protect you, the only protection you have is your family and yourself." The elder handed the gun to the maiden standing nearest to her.

They took that as a sign, and Ophelia and several others reached out and picked a weapon off of the table. She stared at the gun in her hand, having seen many in her life,

but had rarely held one. It was heavy and cold and the longer she observed it, the clammier it felt in her palm.

She had picked up a handheld, one light enough to use single-handedly. But there were others laid out, larger, longer ones. Ones with thick barrels, long rifles with attached slings, and several with double handles. They ranged from ancient to second-hand modern. The archaic guns clashed oddly with the newer electric and laser firearms.

Hers. *Mine*. She thought, was a dull grey gun and when she looked at it closer, she could smell an old metallic odor. The gun unearthed buried memories with a terrible, ripping headache. Men shooting bullets into the sky. Her sire aiming at her mother's head.

Bullet shells digging into her heels and slicing at the bottom of her feet.

An orphan until her presence became a distraction and she was sent to the priests.

Ophelia grasped the weapon like a lifeline and held it to her chest. *I can protect myself*. The gun became a shield.

She looked up and caught the flash of wolfish yellow eyes. She held Seraph's stare until it was broken by the other maidens walking forward and picking out their own shields. Allie had a strap taut over her shoulder.

She wanted to giggle. *We make a bizarre, pitiful sight. Maidens with guns. No Trentian male will expect this*. While the hags meandered around and showed the girls the basics, she fantasized about her warrior sisters.

*We would be expert shots, approachable and deadly. They would come to us like flies only to be trapped in our sticky, deadly web. With a bullet to their head. We will shoot them in their beds, until they lay in a pool of their tainted... blood and...* She shook her head, stifling a hysterical laugh. They would be unexpected.

Her focus returned to the gun against her chest and she felt along its side until her hand released its chamber. She

counted three bullets before pressing it back in, hearing it click in place.

"Where are the bullets?" she asked, searching around.

"There are none."

The statement grew in her like a panicked seed. She opened and recounted her bullets again and when she finished, she recounted again. *I will need to make them count.*

She looked at the other girls and wondered how many bullets they had, if they had any at all.

The thunder of the cane broke her erratic thoughts. "Let's get this over with so we can resume normality as quickly as possible." White fingers clutched guns on every side of her as the maidens followed the elders outside.

Ophelia hung back, letting them trickle past her, allowing a moment to build up the nerve to confront Seraph and his pulsating aura of chaotic emotions. She couldn't discern them anymore, especially from her own. They left her confused and tired and, sometimes, hysterical.

They would only have a few choice moments.

Her sisters would need every bit of protection, even her measly three bullets, to open the gate. Without the Warlord's guard, his advanced weaponry, and steel droids—forged from the spaceship graveyard—to protect them; the hidden evils of the woods had dominion over their fear.

They had the element of surprise. The wild-men and the gangs that fed blood to the forest floor had no laws.

When the last girl's dress fluttered around the corner, she clenched the hard steel of the gun in her hands and braced for him. She noticed the dark ooze of mist wade up first, coming up from behind her, caressing her skin in chilled anticipation.

Ophelia closed her eyes tight and willed herself not to turn around, drop to her knees, and beg for forgiveness. Her skin prickled. The room faded around her as a searing hunger hit her gut, an empty, wet ache bloomed between

her legs as she felt him attach to her back like a life-consuming leech.

They stood like that for a yawning eternity. Ophelia felt him over every inch of her body; his darkness massaged her muscles until she began to relax and accept his overwhelming hold.

*Absorb me.*

"I'm sorry," she pleaded. His hands roamed everywhere all at once, replacing the oppressive presence of his darkness. Ophelia felt them slide up her legs, pushing her dress up. They clasped her thighs and pulled them apart.

They glided over her skin in possessive determination. She sank back into his hard frame as his seeking hands found her core, his tips ghosting over her begging, feminine heat. Breathy moans left her lips as she gave up in his embrace.

"Seraph," she whispered again. "I'm sorry."

Seraph was as silent as the dead while his fingertips traced the seams of her mons with soft, wispy, caresses, stroking her desire with an infuriating slowness.

"I want this."

Ophelia jolted as he spread her wide with sudden intensity, his finger pressing into her heat. The next moment, he spun her around to face him; his knees hit the ground and dust puffed away at the impact. Seraph tore her skirts up to her waist until she was bare from the hips down before him, his face a hairsbreadth away from her sex.

She gripped his wavy, dark hair to keep her balance as he stared up at her with predatory heat. A devilish smirk twisted his mouth and it killed her breath.

Seraph leaned forward and licked her, slow and leisurely, keeping his eyes locked on hers. Ophelia lost sight of him as he tasted her, her eyelids hooded from pleasure. He spread her thighs apart and tongued her core.

She dropped the gun as heavy-metal thunder broke the trance. His hands rounded her waist and steadied her with a deep chuckle, "So clumsy, Ophelia. Do you want us to be discovered?"

Seraph pulled away as quickly as he tasted her. Her body erupted in unfulfilled, forbidden desire. She could feel the slick of his saliva over her burning, empty, feminine heat.

Ophelia shook her head in a desired-haze. "No." When she recovered from the shock, he pulled her hand from her chest with alarming force and spread her fingers roughly apart. "What-?" She tugged her hand away as a heavy band slid down her finger.

He held her to him with bruising restraint and grasped her hand tight in front of her face. The sparkle of sapphire twinkled like the night sky before her eyes, sitting small but prominent at the center of a clear, shimmering yet oddly obscure band. Like clouds trapped in transparent glass.

"Don't take it off," he warned in her ear, a hint of urgent menace laced his tone. "Stop doubting your sanity."

He vanished.

And she could barely breathe.

Ophelia knelt from the sudden loss as the darkness embracing her went with him. The ring glinted with mesmerizing effect and she rolled her hand within the rays of the early morning light. The precious gem glowed with brilliance on each of its perfected facets.

Her head came up, the moment lost as the mouth she had not realized was hanging open in awe snapped shut when the crunch of gravel and footsteps sounded on the paths leading from the courtyard. Twitching with barely-contained desire, she picked up the gun and chased after her sisters.

The touch of his fingers tickling her core stayed with her for the rest of the morning. And so did his eyes.

*Romana*

*Please, Xanteaus, keep us safe. We are far from your light but we are still true.*

Romana followed her elderly mistress, leading the maidens who came after her like a beacon. She was the eldest now amongst them. Because of that, it was her responsibility to show strength - courage, even when there was little to be called upon.

*I should have been one of the brides when the Warlord's decree had come forth ...* but she had been overlooked. She was valuable to the crones, being the only one amongst them who understood the basics of engineering and programming. She had reconfigured their defense systems to override the Warlord's hackers.

The extent of her talents was kept from the elders. They would have been furious, terrified even of her '*supposed*' treachery.

She had the information and the means to protect herself and her sisters—her mothers—within the heavily firewalled systems. Their firewalls were so outdated, so archaic, that modern systems did not have the initial coding to dissolve them.

She uttered a silent prayer to the homeland.

Romana hefted her gun between her hands, adjusting her grip as her muscles ached from the weight. She had chosen a long-range, semi-automatic rifle. She knew guns like she knew systems. This one would pack a punch.

Her mind came back to the present and she surveyed the weapons around their iron walls with a shiver. Romana knew its failings better than most. The gunfire at night, with its increasing regularity, had eroded the sense of security she had nurtured and grown over the many years she had lived within the ward.

Her sisters surrounded her like billowing wraiths. All but Ophelia, the hybrid, who was far behind the pack and moving toward them like a ghost, swimming through the chilled air to catch up to the procession.

A sneer lifted her lips. *Ophelia has been sent a Knight of Xanteaus. A half-breed. She is undeserving. Her blood is filled with hot Earthian taint.*

*It's not my place to judge the god's will. Xanteaus guarded the girl, and so I will too.* It wasn't hard to forget that Ophelia had heater blood in her veins. The girl looked every bit as Trentian as the rest of them, except for her striking, depthless black hair. It pulled the shadows to it like a magnet.

*I will not question Xanteaus and his Knights. It's not my place.* The reminder echoed through her bleak thoughts.

The musings of the elders caught her attention. They stood before the gate now but two were at a lever, a mechanical outlet, halfway up the iron wall. The windows to the forest were minor slits that would only show the eyes to anyone who might be looking in from the outside. It was the only place the gate could be opened.

One could see for miles up in the outpost: over the tops of blood-red trees that reached to the sky with skeletal hands, beyond the forest gore to the graveyard port.

The glint of chrome would be the only indication of the dead ships, lost within the endless ocean of red foliage, red



trees, and the decay of muddy red leaves.

Mistress of the broken throat and brass cane grated orders to the maidens around her. Romana watched as several of her sisters, ones with rifles like hers, moved to stand further back, behind trees and bushes.

"Romana!" Her mistress addressed her, "Get up on the wall with the other elders and watch the forest." She hefted the strap of her gun more comfortably over her shoulder and ascended the rusty stairs. The hag maneuvered the others.

"Sasha, stand by the gate."

"Trealé, your weapon is fickle, stand to the side and try not to shoot unless you're being attacked."

"Allie, give me your gun, you're coming with me."

That caught her attention. Romana looked down to see the Earthian bastard scramble to the elder and hand over her weapon. The girl was followed by another crone and Ophelia stepped forward too. *Always standing up for the heater.*

She hated her for it. But no matter their differences inside the breeder's walls, it was them against the savages outside.

The Warlord could not be trusted to keep them safe any longer, his visits stopped years prior, and the supplies had come less and less over the years. She hadn't seen him or his warriors in over half the time she had been imprisoned in the commune.

The matehood rituals were secret now.

*No, all we have is Xanteaus, his Knights, and our fellow sisters.* Romana adjusted the gun to the crook of her shoulder and looked out over the vermillion forest.

*Allie will be used as cover.*

Not even the men outside would risk the life of the only fertile Earthian female on the planet with their bullets. She scanned the treetops.

The turrets clocked on and drones flew above, the numbers excessive, but one never knew the technology the enemy had, nor the level of desperation, determination, or insanity.

It was quiet for a moment as everyone settled into place, the elders communicating with each other through hand signals. And for the first moment that morning, a shiver of fear ran up her spine. Her gaze went back to the forest line and she locked her weapon in place.

The leaves swayed softly in the breeze.

Her eyes caught the shadowy outline of a man within the forest just as the rumble of the gates opening up below vibrated her legs. She pointed her gun in his direction but immediately felt her apprehension dissipate.

*Xanteaus's Knight is here to protect us.* Her twitching finger lifted away from the trigger by fragmented degrees.

The Knight crouched and settled into the dark vale. Her body shook as the gate's doors stopped with an abrupt clang; they settled into the packed terra.

Allie walked out first, soon followed by two elders, Ophelia, and several ground-based droids. Together they rounded the crumbled destruction and set about disengaging the burned and bullet-ridden corpse out from the metal.

The forest line remained quiet. Only the whistle of flyers chirped between the high branches.

Romana turned her attention to Allie as she grasped the broken arms of the man—with a grimace that could be seen from miles away—and pulled the body loose with straining strength. The Earthian fell from the effort and her dress came away smeared with death. Ophelia and the other maiden pulled the corpse away and all three of them dragged the Trentian decay inside the gate.

The crushed motorbike was in pieces and the bulk of it was carried inside by the elders.

Romana's eyes lifted. The forest remained still. She didn't trust it, but the Knight had not moved from his perch.

The gates clambered shut with metallic finality below her. Romana blinked from the impact and when she looked back, the Knight was gone.

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Ophelia's body smelled like putrescence, and no matter how long or how many times she scrubbed her body down, the smell would not leave her. Her skin had wrinkled and aged with the effort but she wouldn't leave the cleansing waters. And she wasn't the only one.

Her friend was in the corner, stunned, and for the first time without a dress on. The two of them had destroyed the garment after they had stripped and buried the corpse on the outskirts of the grounds.

She watched Allie stare off into space but did not join her in comfort. Everyone mutually left the Earthian alone this evening. Her gun was not given back.

Ophelia sat there until the day ended, until everyone finished up and left, and even Allie uncurled herself and walked out, dripping water up the stairs. With each passing maiden, her heart beat faster; she couldn't will them to stay as much as she couldn't will the night not to fall.

The ring was stiff on her finger, heavy with commitment. The blue stone pulsed over her skin and infused her veins. It looked like the night sky.

*My very own star.* And it felt like *him*.

Ophelia could feel him within the ring. She debated about twisting it and taking it off but knew that disobeying him could make the night more difficult to get through. He had watched her all day: she had felt his hands run through her hair, over her skin, heat her blood. And it made her feel guilty.

The women were focused on the attack and she had been focused on Seraph. Whatever happened, she knew there would be no sleep again for her tonight. The bruises under her eyes were a permanent feature of hers now.

She rubbed her wrinkled fingers over her cheekbones and got out of the water to dry off, ringing her long hair out. The ring caught in her tangles like an annoying reminder.

Ophelia took a deep breath, looked around the baths, and headed quietly to her room. He was watching her as she left the baths, the shadows moving with her and darkening as she moved through the halls.

She closed the door to her room and dragged a chair to bar the handle. *I don't want Allie to come in tonight.*

*His eyes are on me, I'm alone and he's not coming forward.* She sat on the edge of her bed and waited.

*He's goading me.* The ring grew hotter on her finger.

Ophelia turned her attention to the sky outside her window. The stars began to appear in the empty waning light. The gunfire started up like clockwork. The turrets clicked to life at the activity just as the hum of sky drones flew past her viewpoint.

*He's waiting for me to call him. He wants me to beg. I could force his hand.* She looked back down on the ring on her finger. *I could kiss his ring.*

She kissed the ring.

Her lips burned, but nothing happened. She thought she heard an eerie chuckle come from beyond her. The ring began to burn her finger as hot as the eyes she could not see.

*Where are you?* She sighed.

The noises outside tuned out as she surveyed her room for his obscure form. Ophelia bit her lip as a thought crept into her mind. Her toes curled inward as she lifted her feet from the floor and onto the bed. Giving herself a shake, she hunkered down and looked under it.

*He isn't there.* Her breath released. She didn't think he would hide there but her imagination couldn't help but wander- *his hands grasping my ankles and pulling me underneath, never to be seen again.* Like the monster stories of old.

The rabid sounds of men killing each other in the distance briefly hampered her game with him. The screech of death quickened her pulse. And all at once, the game felt wrong and she didn't want to be here—didn't want to hear the dying cries of men all night.

Ophelia got up and closed the shutters and then lay back down, inhaling a deep breath. *Seraph, take me away.* He made no move to do so.

*I won't beg.*

Her attention turned to the chest in the corner. She looked at it for all of a moment before she had enough courage to approach it. The minimal belongings she owned were stored inside. Her hands dug through them until she found a night-shift and laid it out on the bed.

She scanned the dark room before her gaze landed back onto the flimsy dress. Her muscles tensed and she swallowed, finding her mouth dry. She balanced on her feet.

*Just in case he does grab my ankles and drags me under.*

Ophelia let out a ridiculous giggle, working up the nerve, and wishing his hands *were* on her—that he would pull her into the dark and consume her.

Ophelia untied the laces of her bodice and slowly shifted the synthetic cotton material over her shoulders and down her arms. It hung on the swell of her breasts just long enough for her to take a strangled breath before she let it drop down her body.

It pooled at her feet, leaving her completely bare, alone, and in the dark.

His heavy eyes were devouring her form and her heart thundered in her chest.

Slowly, she picked up her night-shift and stepped out of her day-dress, rubbing the material between her fingers before pulling it over her head in a frustrated sigh. She looked around the room defiantly and crawled back onto her creaking bed.

"I won't beg," she challenged. It was only met with soft laughter.

In blatant challenge, she slipped her hands up her skirt and bared her sex to the darkness, and glided her fingers through her swollen heat.

"It's yours."

Ophelia could feel him before he touched her. His taunting gave way to an uncontrollable desire that matched her own. She was flipped onto her stomach and her hands gripped above her head, the warm essence on her tense fingers rubbed on from the blankets.

"You think to ease my rage by this Ophelia? YOU BANISHED ME," he hissed in her ear but it felt like a roar. "Do you think I could be gentle with your body when all I want to do is destroy you for what you've done to me?" She couldn't see him, he was nothing but shadows, but she could feel him grind into her backside so hard her butt rolled up the bed beneath him. Seraph's manhood was as large and persistent as her desire for it and his matched the swell of his anger.

*Rip through my dress, push it into me, I need it. I need you.* Her thoughts were on nothing but her need to claim him and the blood-boiling desperation to be consumed by him.

"I don't want you to be gentle," she breathed, bathed in the scent of crazed lust, sweat, and heat.

"You don't know what you want. I will take your innocence, your chance at a normal life here on your pathetic world, your body will be mine and so will your fate. I will rip it from you, ravage it from you, and I will never give it back." Seraph reached up and gripped the collar of

her gown and tore it down the middle. "I will not be banished again."

"Yes," she whispered, feeling the scrape of his nails along her back, his erection stabbing the cleft of her butt. She moaned when he gripped her hair until it tingled with pain and forced her head to the side. His mouth rolled over her ear.

"Yes, what? My sweet alien." She felt the scrape of teeth down her cheek. She spread her legs out to the side with as much force as she could and pushed her hollowed out sheath further against his manhood. The flimsy clothes between, a barrier she could scream at.

"Take me, Seraph." She would cry for it, "Please."

He cackled and his nails sharpened into claws that dug into her skin. The pain only made her shake more.

"Yes, what?"

"I won't banish you again. I promise. My body for my promise," she mewed. The caged heat of his unmoving form became a torment she wouldn't be able to tolerate soon. *Take me. TAKE ME.*

"But that's not enough." He veered up and palmed her arched butt, his heavy dick settled between her cheeks. Seraph twitched forward and ran his length back and forth between the crevasse as he spread her cheeks. Ophelia still couldn't see him but she could feel the strength in his control. He could do whatever he wanted to her, without a thought, and yet he didn't. "I need you to tell me to break you. That your innocence is mine... that you're giving it to me." He rocked against her. The bed below creaked and groaned from the rushed movements.

"It's yours. It's always been yours," she whimpered as the heat between her legs continued to burn with unfulfilled satisfaction. "Take your rage out on my body. I need it, I need you. I don't belong here, I don't want to belong here. I want to belong to you." She poured her heart out. "I don't want any man in my life but you—"

He tore the bunched up material separating his erection from her desperate core and cupped her sex, her hips lifted into the air from his strength. Two long, strong fingers pushed into her and she quaked as he groaned.

Seraph held her in place while he pressed his fingers all the way in before sliding them out, to slam them back in. The movements jerked her up with each onslaught. "This is mine. No being will see or feel this, be inside it but me for the rest of eternity." He snaked them further in until she felt him push against the barrier of her maidenhood. The tips of his fingers stroked it.

Ophelia wiggled, encouraging him to finally take her. But all he did was caress her from the inside, as if in a sense of hesitation. "Seraph..." she pleaded. He spread his steely fingers and opened her up, the pressure uncomfortable.

"Say it again," he demanded.

Ophelia shook her head. "Break it, make me yours."

And in the next instant, she was thrown over his shoulder, her ass bare in the air and next to his face and she was back in the ether. With one hand holding her in place, the other continued to finger her while he carried her down a silver-clouded hallway.

Her hands bunched up the back of his jacket in support from the pressure being coaxed from her core. Wet desire drenched her skin as he spread her essence all over.

An embarrassed flush warmed her skin from her immodest position.

Seraph palmed her ass roughly before he laid her on a black velvet bed. She reached for him as he tore the rest of her dress, now in strips, off of her body. Her bare legs hooked around his hips and squeezed, reminding him of her need, urging him to go faster.

A glimpse of sharp teeth and a wolfish face appeared before it vanished when he smirked. "You're going to be screaming. Didn't want your ward to break down your door with a legion of highly weaponized droids." He peeled off



his clothes as he stared down at her; she could see straining muscles emerge as his clothes fell away. "Or do I?" He grated in gleeful challenge.

"You do." She laughed.

"Not tonight." Ophelia caught a glimpse of Seraph's massive cock just before he dipped it to rub and probe her core. "I only want the sounds of your screams in my ears tonight."

He was wiry and ripped. The subtle indentations of muscles made him appear like a man but there was something ethereal and incorporeal about his form as well. But it was the tousled recklessness of his hair that stole her breath; that there was a powerful man underneath his dark defenses.

Ophelia thought she was ghostly, but he was glowing and any remaining shadows accentuated his inhuman features. Her fear intensified her lust.

"You're so beautifully pale, your lilac eyes, your mouth, your nipples, even the lips between your legs are milky. Your raven locks are the only dark part of you. You're pearly where everyone else is pink." He ran his hands up her thighs and cinched her waist, before cupping her breasts. She jolted when he fell upon her and ran his face over their taut points.

The room perfumed with their sex. She ran her nails up his exposed back and when her hands slid into his hair, she tugged his head up to her lips.

"Kiss me."

Their mouths tangled as they pressed and rubbed and ground their bodies together, as if they couldn't get close enough. Sharp teeth grazed her lip as Seraph's hand held her chin and neck in place, locking her down.

His yellow eyes filled her lusty, glazed vision. "This will hurt for a moment, just a moment, before I heal you," he stated darkly. "Any pain you feel won't last, Ophelia, I

promise." Concern and desperation laced his tone. She blinked in confusion.

"I want everything you can give me. Even if it comes with pain." He looked at her a moment more before he moved one hand to cup her thigh and hook it around his waist. The one on her neck covered her mouth.

Right as he arched his shadowy body over hers, positioning himself at her entrance, he spat a desperate curse and thrust into her. Her scream was muffled by his hand as her body arched off of the velvet bedding.

She squirmed as something dark and terrible pulled at her mind just as his strong warm hand pressed into her pelvis, pushing her body back into the blankets. A silvery-blue light covered his hand before it sank into her. Her pain and the terrible thoughts vanished immediately.

Her body jerked and writhed as it tried to adjust to his massive shaft. *Not human. Not human.* Ophelia couldn't catch her breath.

He released her and she shot up and grasped and clawed at him. Seraph caught her hands and held them as he ground into her. The force of his hips lifted her legs off the bed and every time the steely point of his tip rolled over her female spot, she cried out. "Too much!"

"Scream for me," his voice rough and his force knocked the breath out of her lungs. When she didn't immediately shriek out with his command, he flipped her over and hooked an arm under her stomach. Seraph's fingertips snaked down until they found her clit and massaged it with deep, rough strokes.

He lifted her up so each thrust of his cock rubbed in sync with his fingers. She felt his other hand pull her hair away and drape it over her shoulder as his teeth came down to graze her skin.

*I'm losing my body.*

"Your shadow is inside you." He bit her ear.

Her hands clenched the blanket before her to hang on. And as his tempo increased and the pressure lifted her knees off the blankets, his hand encircled her neck just as she screamed.

Seraph stopped thrusting as her orgasm hit, instead holding her into him as she tried to break away from the foreign, succulent waves exploding within her. Her body writhed from the invasive connection. "You feel so good, strangling me." He restrained her on his shaft. The heat of their chaotic passion began to cool her skin as she sucked in a raspy breath.

When the last wave rocked through her with a mew, Seraph pushed her forward until only her hips were in the air, his arms came down like bars on each side of her body, and she reached out to grab his wrists as he used her until his body rocked with an explosion as violent as hers.

The ancient bed shook with the urgency. "Ophelia," he groaned. Seraph lifted up and gripped her hips while he came in tight, jerking movements.

His fingers held her so hard, she felt the tiny stabs of nails break her skin, the pain glorious and numb from the pleasure racking her senses.

He didn't pull out as he settled his body over hers like a blanket, the shadows of his cloak misted around their entwined forms. She breathed in the tang of his cold sweat. Her tongue ventured out to lick his tense flesh.

"Never banish me again," he said with warning. She felt her sheath squeeze around him and was gifted several hard pumps. Ophelia felt tired and sated. She closed her eyes while Seraph repositioned himself and laid his arm around her, capturing her against him.

Their breathing evened out as the rightness of their entwined forms lulled the air around them. She could feel something drip between her legs and her heart thumped at the feeling.

"I'm fertile..."

Seraph twirled a lock of her hair with his finger. "Very."

She felt her body tense at his response. Ophelia rose up and looked into his eyes. The longer she tried to read him, the more his eyes narrowed in suspicion. The seed between her thighs became more pronounced as their silence extended. The more she thought about it, the stronger the scent of sex became.

*He's waiting for me to say something. Again.*

She squeezed her eyes shut as embarrassment choked her words. "What if you seed a child in me?" Ophelia opened her eyes to a twisted and sharp toothy grin. The face before her darkened ever so slightly and it was then she realized how frightening he looked with the deep shadows of the room obscuring his usually hidden features.

The ache between her thighs heated and clenched. Had she just slept with a demon? Her eyes fell to the translucent sapphire ring on her finger. The once vibrant blue, now black in the dim grey light.

Seraph's hands came up and pulled at her waist until she was above him. She felt jostled as he positioned her to straddle his hips, smearing their mixed essences further between them.

"I cannot create life," he answered at last. "The dead in me can't seed it." His hand fell between them, pushing her further back until her body was upright. He settled his hand on her stomach. "Nothing will come from our union but pleasure. And yes, you are very fertile." Ophelia tensed as his hand pressed into her. Her eyes dropped to look at herself.

A thought occurred.

"What If I were to wish it?" The pressure of his hand lifted away and when she looked back at him, he was peering at her with an emotionless expression, one she hadn't seen since their first meeting in the garden.

"I wouldn't grant such a wish. I couldn't. Not with my seed."

“Why not?” she was almost too nervous to ask.

“It is an abomination and a spiritual law I refuse to break.” Ophelia could feel his eyes run over her naked form like electric fire as he spoke. She watched him inhale the sight of her and felt the hollow ache grow between her legs again. “If you bargained for a child, I would still not grant that request. No man’s seed but mine will ever be within you. If an abomination is made,” he paused, “creatures from the Great Above and the Great Below will come forth from their realms and reap. I am flattered that you would think of such a bargain from me though.” She was caught off guard as a vehement laugh left his lips. “God, the irony. No wonder I’m going to Hell.”

“You’re not going to Hell, you would be there already if you were. I would never let you go.” She shifted slightly but stopped as his hands grabbed her waist and kept her in place. “The men, Seraph, outside the walls. What will happen when they come?” She caught his eye. “Will you kill them, or me?”

“Them.”

Ophelia bit her lip and looked at the ring. “What will happen after?”

“As long as you allow me to protect you...” He trailed off. He reached for her hand with the ring and circled it with his fingers. She watched as he slowly loosened it off of her. The beautiful band vanished and seeped into his palm but the stone remained. He lifted up and sat facing her, their chests pressed together, and she felt her nipples tighten. The smirk on his face indicated that he felt it as much as she did. “Swallow this.” Seraph pressed the bead to her lips.

When she opened to ask why, he pushed it into her mouth and roughly tilted her head back. A hand came around her neck and massaged until she sucked the gem down.

Ophelia sputtered and gagged, confused tears came to her eyes as she strained to get out of his arms. But they held her like steel restraints. "What did you give me?" she shrieked, already feeling a penetrating, burning heat blaze down her throat.

Her eyes watered as something loosened and unraveled inside her, tendrils of warmth and ice snaking through the core of her, until it seemingly found something in her chest. Ophelia felt it pivot and burrow into her. Not physically burrow, but spiritually dig into her soul. The thing that she swallowed encased it like a heavy blanket until it punctured and seeped into it her. It became a part of her.

She felt her hands tugged away from her body as she tried to claw her heart out, tear her hair out. Screams filled her ears as she fought off the invasion.

Then she felt him in her. Like a second heartbeat. Ophelia's movements stilted and stopped as suddenly as the coupling began. She could feel her soul mold into something new, shape with and around his, and she couldn't move as her entire being accustomed to the metamorphosis.

A blissful euphoria erupted throughout her body.  
*Completion.*

*Power.*

And the next moment she was pushed into the bed and he was pounding into her, covering every inch of her body with his as his soul did the same. Ophelia clawed and bit at him as a terrible, ultimate possession of everything that was her became his.

She shuddered in rapture as something deep inside of her was stroked and caressed, and her body ruptured in climax as the void of space and its stars floated before her eyes.

But they weren't stars: it was his devious, manipulative eyes and his endless shadows around her that she saw.

Ophelia felt utterly consumed as his body roared within her while he growled in her ear, "This is what it means to be soul mates."

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She felt deathly tired, curled in cool sheets within the crisp, quiet space of his room. If it was his room, she didn't know, because nothing was within but the monolith of the bed and the floating lantern above their heads. Her mind and body waded in and out of sleep.

Ophelia knew a significant amount of time had passed but she couldn't bring herself to care. Only Allie would immediately notice if she was missing.

Seraph was awake, lying behind, beside her, half on top of her. His body was the only thing that kept her warm. *He probably doesn't sleep*. Her mind mulled over the differences between the dead and the living.

She murmured, "Do you sleep?"

The response was immediate. "No."

"I wish I could sleep."

"The denizens of the ether don't sleep."

She felt the bed shift and a blanket cover her. *No wonder I was cold*. The thought had no effort. Ophelia felt his soul inside her and she curled up reactively trying to savor the fluttering sensation. The power it gave her. Something she had never experienced before.

Her hand was pulled from her body, her muscles weak, and it hung limply in his grip. A warm band was placed back on her finger and she stiffened. Ophelia pulled her arm from him and looked at the band. The translucent, crystalline ring was back but the gem remained gone. She twirled the circlet as she hugged her hand to her chest.

"Seraph... Will you tell me how we met?" There was a pause and for a moment she thought he might answer.

Until an audible sigh came from his lips. "No."

"Is it really that horrible?" she asked, her fingers squeezed the band, testing if it would break under pressure. *No give.* "Will I hate you, if you tell me?" She wanted to choke on the question, couldn't imagine the thought or trauma of hating him. But she couldn't help her mind from wandering to all the dark corners of her thoughts.

"It is not a good memory and..." Seraph paused. "I don't know if you would hate me. I'm not sharing it with you on my behalf, Ophelia, I keep it from you on yours." She felt his mouth rest on the back of her head and her hair shift from a nuzzle. "Your life is better without it. Just know I fixed it the same way as the attack on your ward."

"You turned back time?"

"Something like that, yes. Our meeting never technically happened and everything in between is dust if you think about it that way." She pressed back into him, soaking up his warmth. His answer seemed... okay and she began to feel marginally less wary.

Ophelia smiled, "So we never actually met."

"I suppose."

She turned around and caught his eye with a twinkle. "My name is Ophelia. Well met."

He grabbed the back of her head, his fingers entwined in her hair while he pressed his warm lips over her ear. "Hi, Ophelia. My name is Seraph. And you're mine." She felt a goofy smile break across her face as he kissed her lobe.

"And you're mine. I will never give you back your soul."

"You couldn't even if you tried. It's attached to you tighter than your shadow."

"I'll keep it safe." Her smile faltered as he looked at her then, really looked at her, as if something serious came to mind and his face closed up from her words. The mood tilted and she couldn't catch on why.



"I know you will." He pressed an urgent kiss to her mouth before breaking away. "You can stay here. I don't have to take you back."

Ophelia bit her tongue and closed her eyes tight. *I want to stay.* But she loved more than him. *I love him.* Her heart filled with terrifying heat. "I have to go back."

Seraph seemed to assume her answer because he held her tight to his chest. The next moment, she heard the creak of her bed and felt the airy light of dawn hit her face. He disengaged himself from her and stood up, glorious in his sculpted nudity. She lost her breath and missed him all at once.

"Let me know if you change your mind." He picked up her gun and held it out to her. She took it from him without a word. The metal clinked with her ring. "I'll be watching."

"Did you just offer to kill me?" The oddity of the question made her giggle.

"Yes."

Ophelia curled her legs under her and sat up. His dark eyes fell over her body, also brightened by the sun's rays and she noticed his hands clench, his neck stiffen, his jaw tick. He pulled his dark cloak over him just as she saw his manhood, larger than she thought imaginable, erect. It was gone soon after and so was he.

She sat there, staring at where he had just been, waiting, but nothing happened. It was then she could see the indents of his rough handling on her pale skin. Love bites and red streaks where she hadn't realized were there. Ophelia felt her lips twist in a crooked smile to match his own as she gingerly left her cot and dressed.

The ache between her legs was a welcomed pain he left with her.

After taking a quick breakfast, she sought out Allie and went to seed the gardens, a fluttering prayer on her lips that today would be a quiet one.

"You're late." Allie looked up at her and gasped.

It was right at the end of her wish that the ground shook around her and a black bruise opened up the clouds in the sky.

They watched as a large ship flew into orbit and directly over the skies of their commune, only to fly by at a slower landing speed somewhere off in the direction of port Kreatiax. A half day's journey away and out of sight but the tremble of the ground was enough of an indication that the ship landed on the planet.

The vessel was the first active one she had seen in her entire life. Ophelia wiped her sweaty palms against her dress.

Seraph wandered around the ward, invisible in the shadows, eyeing the proceedings that were unknowable to Ophelia. The crones were deep within their dwellings discussing the dead messenger who had crashed into the gate. He had very little to catch up on from his time away.

The bargain, the anima had always been the most important aspect of his brief visits to the living world. But Ophelia, he wanted her; he lusted after her. She had given him a second chance at life, even if it was vicariously through her.

He finally understood why others of his kind tore their way back into this world in any way that they could.

Something had shifted in him last night. A desperate, suffocating need to bind himself to her. He owned her soul but he did not own her being. He wanted her, needed her to feel the same obsession that he was feeling. *I'm the one who is going crazy.*

He pictured himself kneeling before her, kissing her feet, begging for a modicum of attention. Begging her to stay with him, not because she had to, but because she wanted to. He pictured himself clawing his way up her exposed legs, biting his way over her perfect opaline skin and taking her choice away. Forcing her submission with his demands.

He grew hard at the thought.

Seraph wanted to take her relentlessly until she succumbed to his every desire. He wanted to lose himself in her tight, supple, female flesh. He couldn't seed her but he would like to spend the rest of eternity trying.

His face twisted with the thought and he felt the shadows darken around him, the memory of the hum rip through his head, and his soul blacken with malice.

*She'll protect me. I can never truly fall if she protects me. How the cards have turned.*

He left the confines of the ward to clear his head and found dozens of corpses rotting, in every stage, littered throughout the red foliage. He found himself looking back at the wall as a foreign shiver of worry coursed through him.

*How had I missed the slaughter so close to Ophelia?* He walked amongst the dead, invisible and silent. Not even the bloat flies and bugs flitted away as he passed.

He came upon one, newly dead, and knelt next to it. It was an adult Trentian male with blistering red burns over his neck and shoulders. The cloth and leather the male wore were half seared away and precise, cauterized holes punctured through his shoulder and pectoral muscles.

*A laser weapon did this. It wouldn't make the same noise as a normal gun. But why?*

Seraph got up and located another corpse, further back. This one had a single, precise shot through the center of his forehead. Dealt by a metalloid bullet. He grabbed the man's hair and lifted the lifeless head up and examined the back of his skull. *A clean shot all the way through.* He could see dried blood around the corpse but it was hard to detect amongst the vermillion fallen leaves.

Another corpse, older, had multiple gun wounds. Another had a headshot. There were snipers hidden within and he began to feel the presence of the heathens.

He progressed deeper into the wilderness until he located a company of men, almost enough to be a squadron. All milling about as he walked around the periphery of their encampment.

Seraph smiled as he spotted one of the alien men he had killed before he bargained with his girl. *I am going to kill you again. I have marked you for death.*

It was only a matter of time before they attacked again. If the corpses around the commune were any indication, they were killing messengers and scouts. *To lure out the reigning warlord.*

Seraph heard a pained, feminine gasp and his feet led him to the source. The cries drew him into a shadowy tent that had a single electric light in the middle. Dead bugs littered the forest floor around it as others, not yet dead, flew in chaotic circles close by. Zap. Zap. Zap. The catcher lured them to their deaths.

Beyond was a beaten female being held down and taken by force. A man with scars crossing over his meaty, naked back strained into the thrashing, defeated body.

Seraph felt the quake of terra beneath his feet, as the items around the small tent vibrated and crashed to the ground. He heard the shouts of men; a ship was in orbit and making landing procedures nearby.

He stepped out to look at the sky just as the man pushed the broken girl away and latched his pants. The tent appeared to belong to the alien cretin who walked to a metal crate littered with weapons and electronics.

A computer-like device flickered and swirled as information was transmitted. *I hate technology*, he hated it even more because he predated it. The brutish man grumbled at the screen before he equipped several guns and walked out.

Seraph turned his attention to the girl who hadn't moved. She lay sprawled out on the tousled mat, eyes wide and glazed, her hand latched to a nearby stake. The only

signs of life she emitted were shallow, lackluster breaths and the occasional blink. He crouched at the girl's side and he vaguely recognized the alien as one of the maidens who had been paired off recently.

*'I want to die.'*

"Do you want to die?" he asked, looking down at her. At first, he didn't think she heard him but after a moment her mouth parted and her eyes closed tightly. Not even a flinch.

"Yes," she whimpered. He reached out to grasp her limp hand; the girl did not pull back from him. He felt life inside her.

"You're with child."

"Kill it too." She curled up on herself and cried. "It hurts so much."

"I won't kill your child."

"Then what good are you? Death has no prejudice," she said through her tears. *But I do.*

"I can offer you salvation, and I can heal your body. I can give you the *chance* to make a better life for you and your unborn child." His bargaining skills felt a little rusty. "This horror does not make you."

The girl looked up at him. "Am I really with child?"

"Yes."

"What would I have to do? For these things?" He watched her naked body tremble with the question.

"For what you ask. Your soul," Seraph coaxed. He said it in such a way that it didn't seem important. "You and your baby will die here, otherwise." *And then the silence.* He knew this part. It always happened during the bargain as humans, and now aliens, thought about the enormity of the deal. The weight of pros and cons. But this time, he was on borrowed time. "I need your answer now." He let go of her hand and began to walk out.

He heard the girl shift and struggle into a sitting position just as he reached the exit. "Don't leave me here." Her voice was desperate and hurried. "Please." She stood up

with a wince, pulling the soiled blanket with her. He turned around and placed his hand around her neck, feeling the muscles strain beneath his finger and felt the contract seal between them. The tether created with eternal finality. His mana seeped into her and healed her pain.

He broke the restraint on her wrist.

Seraph felt a wicked smile cross his face and an internal stretch of his power, feeling like his old self again.

"Follow me." He clouded their forms and walked them out of the encampment unobserved. The men were rapidly equipping weapons and armor, moving in the direction where their ship had landed. They were a noisy bunch and it grated on his nerves.

The maiden trailed mutely behind, the swoosh of the sheet along the ground and their footsteps the only sound between them. He led them back to the path that led to Ophelia's ward. Even from this distance, one could see the walls tower over the trees. It made for a strangely ominous sight.

"Where are you taking me?"

He thought about not answering, preferring silence, but knew this girl will be near Ophelia. "To the road." He was fully incorporeal now but just there enough that she could see him. "Once there, you'll follow it to the breeder's ward."

She whimpered as she stepped on something sharp but he ignored it and continued walking. It was up to her now to heal, not him. *I cannot be her strength. She will need to grow it with her child.*

"They won't let me in."

"They will." And the subject was dropped. After some time, they made it to the dirt road. Seraph shot out his spear and stopped the girl before she left the coverage of the trees. He could hear a group of travelers coming down the path in slow, cautious silence. "Stay here." He ventured out to investigate.

The band of aliens coming down the path was trying to be silent, but one could only be so quiet when there were a dozen warriors riding on shielded motorbikes. They created a perimeter around a group of denizens. The men on the bikes were in pairs, one sitting at the front, driving the vehicle, while one sat on the back manning mounted, scoped guns.

The company looked drained of life but alert.

It wasn't the escort on the outside that intrigued him the most, he thought, for surely they must be guarding the elusive Warlord. The sentry was, in its entirety, made up of nearly fifty men, more than enough to protect their leader.

When he traveled closer, it wasn't men within the interior: it was a group of women and children. They were headed to the high-walled commune. There were no diversions in the path at this point in the road.

Seraph could sense the savage scouts from the encampment he had just vacated shift and move through the trees. He thought of the dead Trentians in the forest.

*Some of these men, who move like predators stalking their prey, have perfect aim.*

The bounty in the middle was too great to not risk an attack, and from the tense vigilance of the warriors on the bikes and those on foot, they knew it too. The commune was being sieged from outside the boundary of the high-walled turrets, yet it was still the safest place for those outside.

He went back to the girl huddled in the forest. "Go to the men coming down the road." She flinched at his sudden appearance. *Now she's afraid of me?* He sighed. He watched her look out and take in the militarized men on the bikes with life-threatening intensity.

"Will it be safe?"

Seraph twitched in annoyance. "You wanted me to kill you not too long ago. It is safe. In fact, you being with them will ensure their safety too." Time was ticking. She held his protection, and if she was with the other women and



children, they would be safe too. At least until they were within the walls. "Your choice." And he moved to leave.

"Wait!" When he stayed at her urgent request, she continued, "What is the sex of my child?"

Seraph looked at her pleading, hopeful face and hesitated. He moved toward her and placed his hand on her pelvis, sensing the child immediately. "A girl."

A radiant smile bloomed on her lips, and he faded.

He stayed just a moment longer to see her step out in front of the troop. Every gun was aimed at her head and heart before they were made to lower and let her within their protection.

*They will live another day.*

---

"Ophelia," he breathed into her ear. She jolted back right into his chest and his arms snaked around her form. He buried his face into her hair and breathed in her exotic scent and sweat. "Go to the baths." He spoke just low enough that only she could hear. He left her there to make her escape from the others.

He went below to wait for her arrival. The baths were not deserted, but it wasn't hard to spook a couple of already frightened girls away.

All he had to do was drag his nails along the wall and heat the waters to an unbearable degree for their alien blood. He was burning out the lights along the wall as the girls hurriedly made their exit.

He smirked. *I feel good.* He rolled his neck and waited.

When he saw Ophelia descend the heavy stone-slab steps with quiet delicacy, he felt his smirk grow into an all-out grin. She came to a stop right before the rectangular bath started. He watched her look around for him, and waited for her heart to race, before he stepped behind her

and pushed her hair over her shoulder, running his nose along her fluttering pulse.

“Seraph.” Her lungs deflated with his name. He grabbed her dress and pulled it over her head, hearing her crazed laugh fill his ears. “Someone may come down.”

“They won’t see me, only you.” He cupped her naked breasts and pinched her nipples until they peaked between his fingers. “I hope you’re a good actress.”

“I-I’m no, she squeaked. “Can’t you keep them away?” He reached around and cupped her sex, pushing his fingers over her clit, past it, until they probed at her slick entrance. He lifted her body against him and carried her into the waters. She melted into his arms.

“What will you give me for that request?” He circled her tight sheath before turning her around to face him. He lifted the veil of darkness around him and his clothes went along with it.

“What do you want?” He shivered as she ran her nails down his chest, leaving red streaks, like cuts, on his skin.

Seraph leaned down to brush his lips over her pouty ones. “You. In my bed, every night.”

“That’s a steep request for privacy.”

“It’s mutually beneficial.” He cupped her butt and ground her against his erection. Her wet legs enveloped his waist.

“It’s night somewhere, everywhere, all the time.” He laughed, filled with unusual glee at her well-placed suspicion. “How about, I want you, in *my* bed every night,” she amended.

“Deal.” The air hollowed out around them, their privacy ensured.

He felt her hands push at his chest as she caught his eyes, hers wide with shock. “You just committed to me for eternity.”

“I was committed to you for eternity when I merged my soul with yours.” He leaned forward and captured her

mouth before she could ask another mundane question. "You were committed to me when you gave me your soul to be merged." Seraph walked her to the edge and laid her body down on the stone, keeping her legs wrapped around him. "We must be quick, I don't deal in bargains outside of the soul." He covered her arching form, rubbing his straining erection roughly between her legs, mimicking what was about to happen and took her parted lips. "Especially of the *mouth ... privacy.* " He buried his tongue in her, stopping her once again from responding.

When he had robbed her of breath, he reared up and gripped her legs, and spread them wide before his gaze. He kneeled between her slick folds and ravaged them with his starving tongue.

The taste of her arousal drove him mad, paired with the undulating rock of her tight, wet core pressed into his mouth, and her breathy pleas made him a slave.

Seraph's palms kneaded her buttocks as she rocked deliciously over his face. *I want her sex all over me.* He took her wanton thrashing with barely constrained lust.

"Ophelia," he growled. "Release on me."

She complied with a moan and reared up and grabbed the back of his head. He snaked his hand between them and pushed his fingers into her dripping cunt, just in time to feel her grip him and convulse into his hand.

He waited until her convulsions settled before he removed his pumping fingers and lifted her hips up, replacing them with his aching manhood. He thrust into her slowly as each inch squeezed him with heated pain before it gave way in submission.

Her nails sank into his shoulders, "Seraph," Her head thrashed. "I can't!"

He gritted his teeth, "Brace for me." A wild moan answered him.

Seraph pushed her back down until her heaving body was splayed out like a sacrifice. The dew of her sex

glistened all over his face. He nearly came from the sight of her impaled on his cock.

Ophelia reached out and threaded her fingers through her hair and jerked her hips, gripping him in her tight sheath. *Euphoria*. His nails elongated again and pierced the stone floor as she adjusted herself on him.

"Good girl."

"I am," his alien whispered in invitation. Seraph lost his mind. He pumped into her relentlessly, violently, watching every fiber of her body tremble from the onslaught.

He watched her eyes clench shut, her body arch off the cold floor, her breasts bounce, and her fingers tug at her hair as he took her mindlessly.

When she shrieked his name, abandoning any illusion of privacy, Seraph reached forward and petted her soul, feeling the sensation between the two of them. Both erupted in each other's arms as he lost control of his mana for a short second and the darkness burned out the rest of the room's lights.

Seraph fell upon her shaking body as he lit the black space around him with a silver gleam.

They lay there in silence, the calm after a storm until the beating of their hearts slowed to a normal, shuddering pace. Seraph pushed himself away and grabbed her ankles with a smirk and dragged her into the waiting water. Ophelia let him maneuver her in exhausted compliance.

When they were in the stilled, now-chilled waters, he ran his hands over her and healed her aches. He held her to him as she curled into a ball on his lap.

"How much time do you think we have left?"

"I don't know. Only souls have a lasting bargain, I assume everything else is diminished by degrees." He combed her hair with his fingers.

Ophelia shivered and he held her tighter. "They will attack soon."

"Yes."

“What will we do?”

“We can leave now, let their fates take their natural course.” He sighed, “Or we can try to protect them, but I’m limited in what I can do without upsetting the balance. And Ophelia, a tear is far worse than anything that can happen here.”

“I can’t leave my sisters here, knowing what awaits them... I want to leave, but I just can’t *not* try. Did you see the ship in the sky this morning?”

“Mmm yes. It docked several hours from your location.”

“I’ve never seen a working spaceship before.” She slid her arms around him. The comforting contact burned him. “Do you know why it’s here?”

“I don’t, but I have a feeling we’ll find out very soon.” He sensed the rumble of the ward’s gate opening above them. The troop of ragged warriors, women, and orphans had arrived. “Our time is up.” He lifted her out of the baths and set her on her feet, drying her body and lifting her discarded dress over her head.

“What’s happening?” Her hands latched onto him as he faded into the darkness.

“Visitors.”

---

*H*e followed Ophelia out of the stony underground tunnels until they were topside. He left her to hide in the closest shadows, keeping her within arm's length at all times. She made it easy for him, staying to the outskirts herself.

Seraph would have been furious, seeing dozens of men enter the ward, but he had set it in motion. The soiled children and women were ushered into the dormitory. He wasn’t against them being within the walls as long as Ophelia remained separated.

They watched as the crooked hag with the cane, the leader of the group, argued with several of the warriors. Even *his* ears bled from her voice.

"Stay away from them," he said just loud enough for Ophelia to hear. She twitched with anxiety.

"They brought the children here," she said, taking a step closer to him.

"I think your Warlord may be dead. He may have been dead all along." They watched as the crone fell to her knees in despair before several of the men. Their faces were pensive and exhausted. The older maiden he saw talking to Ophelia before his banishment hurried forward and held the crone in comfort.

Another girl ran forward and threw her arms around one of the exhausted warriors. That female and only a few others made their appearance, while the rest were hidden behind the walls inside. Ophelia turned away. He placed his hand on her back but she didn't look sad; she looked nervous.

"Just ask me to kill them," he stated with scary numbness. "Let me kill them."

The shutter of the high-walled gate closed behind them just as hollers and gunfire pierced the evening.

Defense perimeters were set up around the wall.

The remaining vassals of the deceased Warlord made camp outside the gardens and courtyard, and the elder's boarding was turned into a base camp. Glowing orange lanterns hung outside the entrance and drew moonlit moths that swam around it with abandon.

All of the women had been ushered inside and locked within. They were supposed to have minimal contact with those outside; the empty rooms were filled with the civilians and children that had arrived.

Several of the Trentian men stationed around the edges were related to the maidens within. Ophelia had seen no one she knew walk through the gate, but it wouldn't have made a difference if she had, as Seraph kept her from making her presence known to the outsiders. She was just a tired girl; she didn't have the capability or knowledge to interfere with tactics.

The men had confiscated all but a dozen or so guns from the commune's cache, and the rest were hidden away with her sister-maidens or discarded for their archaic design. And when the men inquired about the Earthian female amongst the group, she had found her purpose.

Ophelia tore her way back into the dormitories and located her friend, hiding in her room, before ushering her up to the second level. If she could do one thing, she would shield Allie.

Seraph was not pleased. He was confined to his incorporeal form in the presence of others unless otherwise called.

She and Allie barricaded her door with the chest. It wouldn't keep anyone out for more than a few seconds, but those seconds could make all the difference.

"Please sit down," Allie insisted softly. Ophelia had been pacing and watching outside the window from the shadows. "You're making me nervous."

"I'm nervous." Her heart thumped. It was frighteningly quiet outside. "Who will protect us now that the Warlord is dead?"

"The men outside *might*. They haven't attacked us yet, and they brought the children here, unharmed."

"They have us under siege, Allie, you can hear the gangs outside from every side. We don't have the defenses to keep them out." She rubbed her eyes.

"No one is going to be able to get through our walls. They have stood for generations. Please sit down."

Ophelia looked at her friend, debating how much she should tell her about how poor their defenses actually were. She looked around for Seraph but he was not within the small room. She turned back to the window. "I wish I could protect us." She could ask Seraph to kill them, but the thought frightened her. There were hundreds of men outside the gates. Could he possibly manage that? And his price was steep...

Allie's face lit up with a sad smile. "I wish I could protect us as well."

Ophelia wrenched her hands together and sat next to her friend. "You should be afraid, Allie," she whispered.



"Of the inevitable? I am... I'm afraid that our time together is coming to an end."

"The rumors. They won't affect you, you're Earthian, you're fertile, but... you're Earthian. Those men may hate you and want you more than anything in this place." She shook her head. "I won't leave you."

"They'll treat you the same way." Their hands entwined.

Ophelia shook her head, *No, they won't. Seraph would rip their souls from this world before they could hurt me.* She had one last bargaining chip. One more plea she could make. *He already has my love but he doesn't have my life. And he wants my life more than anything, now that he has my body.*

She thought of him as that haunting shade then. The one who had never quite left her mind. The dark entity who watched with insidious yellow eyes from the shadows. The creature who stole people's souls for '*dust.*' The man who made bargains with those during their lowest hour for his own personal gain. She loved a monster; her soul was mated to a monster. Even now, she could feel him spread like a hungry infection in her chest.

Ophelia shook her head and clawed at the place over her heart. He didn't feel like a monster to her. He felt like radiating streaks of electricity and ice. Wild, uncontrollable, deadly, yet essential, and needed. Seraph was a double-barreled gun. She laughed at her analogy, eyeing her static handheld on the chair next to her. Allie looked at her with concern.

Seraph was her double-barreled shotgun. One bullet to destroy, one bullet to protect, equally efficient in both.

"Are you okay? What are you laughing at?"

Her lips twitched, "Just the gun." She limply indicated it. She knew Allie was looking at her and the gun, trying to make a connection. She gave up a moment later and undressed. Ophelia watched in silence as she pulled out her torn shift and covered herself. The dress looked strange on

Allie, the tear in the shoulder a glaring reminder of Seraph's presence. She looked away.

When Allie crawled under the threadbare blanket, Ophelia stood up to look outside one last time. She was tempted to blow Seraph a kiss but wasn't sure if he was out there to catch it, so she closed the shutters to the starlight and joined her friend under the covers.

"Allie... If you could have any wish granted to you, anything in the universe, what would it be?"

Her friend didn't immediately answer but she did shift to face her. "That's a hard question to answer." There was a long pause. "I think... I would want power."

"Why?"

"If I had power, I could control my destiny."

"Would you sell your soul for it?"

"No," she said sleepily. "I don't think I would."

*What did I sell my soul for?* Ophelia lay awake, staring into the darkness.

Her heart raced with disquiet for an eternity. She saw the sun crest the horizon just as her eyes shut.

---

*Screams. I hear screams!*

Ophelia jolted awake to the sky falling and the sound of ground-shattering explosives. She and Allie struggled to their feet just as the shutters blasted open. She saw drones fall out the air in a powerless metal-fall of dead hardware, crushing the ground with splintering impact, plummeting into buildings like armor-piercing bullets, and landing on unlucky, uncovered warriors.

The sound of thunder and riotous death pierced the early morning light, just as the crystalline diamonds of frost melted away.

"They have EMPS!" a man screamed, running through the gardens, knocking his electric pistol with his hand.

"We need to hide." Allie grabbed her arm and turned from the open window.

All movement stopped just as the last droid crumbled the top portion of the wall, warping the galvanized metal into a crushed 'V.' The air sucked back, whipping her dress toward the window as a thunderous, metal-dissolving roar tore through the ward.

Her eyes widened in horror as the gate caved inward violently before the metal burst into red flames, only to melt into a volcanic puddle over the ground. The Trentians manning the walls, and several others by the pulverized gates, fell into the heated, flowing mass, melting along with it. Their deaths were so quick that not even a blink or a prayer could be uttered before their bodies were consumed.

"Oh my god."

She was unable to look away. Something like a cannon hit the walls continuously on every side and lit up the remaining metallic walls in blue lightning. Her hair became lighter as the static enveloped them, lifting around her like a halo.

"We need to hide, Ophelia! We can't stay here. The dormitory is the first place they will go to look for us," Allie screamed, they could barely hear each other over the artificial thunder and lightning.

"Let's go!" She turned away from the destruction, pulled into the room by her friend and reached for her pistol. *It's not electric, since it doesn't have circuitry. It's fine.* They turned toward the door together just as Seraph appeared before them and rushed her. Soul-laced, elongated spears crossed his back.

A jagged tear ripped behind him and she saw a brief flash of the ether.

Allie scrambled back at his abrupt appearance. Seraph enveloped her and she breathed in his reassurance. The room lit up in magnetic blue. Allie came forward and grabbed her arm from the other side, dragging her attention back to the chaos.

"They're on shielded hoverbikes. They're swarming the courtyard!" Men's shouts joined the electric strikes as they rushed closer. Bright flashes of white light bloomed behind them, spots flashing in her eyes.

"Ophelia, tell me to kill them. LET ME KILL THEM." Seraph shook her. She struggled out of his grip before he ghosted her away.

"No!" She opened her mouth to continue, her vision filled with his horrifyingly demonic eyes, her arm held by Allie. "Seraph, we ha—" Time stopped as a flashbang whipped past their heads and hit the floor beside her with a thunk. Her senses died. Her eyes blinded in white, her ears rang, and her head split in half.

She and Allie crumpled to the ground in shock, clawing their faces as everything fell away. Seraph vanished with the blinding light.

Ophelia couldn't sense anything. She groped around until her hands found Allie and they gripped each other in panic. The ringing in her ears only faltered by degrees as stun-grenades continued to be launched throughout the dormitory and scattered bullets zipped by between blasts. Her body heated from the bombs and she could feel her skin tighten, peeling back and expanding as blisters formed over her arms. She felt feverish from the fire.

Her senses shut down and even her connection to Seraph was lost.

Her hand came down upon her gun and she clasped it like a lifeline, ignorant of the hot metal, and released the safety. The stinging light faded as her sight slowly came back. She blinked in rapid succession as the building shook

around her; her eyes felt like they had a thick, frosted glaze over her irises.

They scrambled from the door as the wood caved in, the chest yanked from its barricade under the pressure. She pointed the gun at the entrance. *I hope it's the entrance. I can't see!*

"Allie!" She screamed at the top of her burning lungs, "Stay behind me!" The door splintered open and she shot at the dark forms that came through.

A man roared with pain as a shadow toppled to the side.

The moment when she was torn away from Allie, her hands grasped and swung, trying to find her friend. *Allie where are you!?* They screamed as the men overpowered them. She could hear her friend as her focus shifted to their survival.

"An Earthian. A breeder Earthian. The rumors were true."

"She's fucking beautiful."

Ophelia fought and scratched at the man who jostled her into his arms. *They have her.* The gun was knocked from her hand. She felt blood well up under her fingers as she located his head and ravaged his face. The give of soft skin collected under her nails and she heard the man curse as he yanked her head back with a brutal grip on her hair.

The smell of sour smoke hit her nose as he spat at her in anger. Warm, wet saliva dripped over her eye.

Her body hit the floor with such force that her head snapped back and cracked into the wood. A boot hit her stomach with a violent kick and the air held in her lungs vomited out; she curled onto her side and coughed up spittle. *Allie.*

"Breeder bitch," a man yelled at her as another kick hit her side. Her hands fell away from protecting her head as she was dragged across the room by her feet; hands ripped open her skirts and pushed her legs apart. The pain in her head fissured her thoughts. *I need to get to Allie.*

Through the ringing in her ears, she could sense Seraph trying to reach her. *Stay away*. “Stay away!” she screamed in her head and out loud, focusing on her shadow. Ophelia could already feel the fissure of the tear between their worlds.

The light was too bright and the presence of others was too many for him to go unnoticed.

The bruising hands that groped up her legs pulled away—so suddenly—she reactively tensed for another beating.

“Look at her! She’s a half-breed. Stop. Fucking. Hitting her. The Generals will want her.” Her hands were pulled from her face, tied, and pinned behind her back as a man hefted her off the floor. “Look at her hair. It’s black.” Rough hands pulled at her static-charged locks.

Ophelia tried to peer at her enemies but her pupils remained glazed. Even if she weren’t temporarily blinded, that blow to the head made it difficult to keep her eyes open from the ache. The men dragged her out of the room and she could feel her heels bump over the steps as they descended into the gathering, blazing chaos.

*Seraph is going to tear you apart.*

She just had to survive until nightfall, until the fire died out. They could destroy her, use her, and it wouldn’t matter, but she had to protect Allie.

Ophelia prayed for clouds.

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*Seraph is going to kill all of you.*

Her thoughts were swayed with confusion, but firm.

She was drenched in water, the dirt and blood from her hands were scrubbed away by the hands of hags. They kneeled in the charred courtyard beside heavy pails of soapy water and cleaned the disturbed maidens in frightened silence. The hands washing her welted skin

shook with terror. Trentian men leered from every side as the maidens were stripped and readied for the usurper.

Her eyesight was still cloudy and she couldn't focus on anything at any length before bolts of pain shot through her head. All she knew was that she was not alone, she was being washed, and that Allie was amongst the girls near her. Ophelia weakly lifted her hand to her eyes and shaded them to look at the men that encircled them.

*You'll be dead by this time tomorrow.*

"Seraph, I'm sorry," she said under her breath, as the sun beat down from above and tormented her splitting headache. His foreboding presence was nearby.

The Trentian men around her were silhouetted against the light and they looked like specters. The scythe-shapes angled at their arms were nothing more than rifles and electric weapons encased in portable faraday cages to protect them from the electromagnetic pulses. In fact, she didn't think any of their weaponry was affected by the EMP bomb. It didn't matter.

*He's going to split your heads open. Just wait until the shadows come.*

Her violent musings gave her enough willpower to keep fighting, to keep her senses about her, even while her entire world was tilted on a disorientated axis.

Ophelia squinted down at herself when the hag moved away to attend another girl. She could still see large blotches of dirt covering her arms in legs, until she pressed her hands to wipe it off only to find her body bruised beyond recognition. She pressed her fingers into one of the stains on her arm. She didn't feel pain.

Seraph was there. She could feel him but not the pain. His sliver of soul bloomed in her heart and kept her sane and comforted.

Her body racked with convulsions as her heat-fever began to boil her alien blood. His icy jolts kept her from passing out like some of the other maidens who were

delirious around her. Ophelia didn't want to be one of the girls who had to be hauled back inside down to the bathhouse.

There were dozens of the Usurper's men crawling over every step of the ward. She could hear them setting up camp, rebuilding the damaged gates, and raiding the dead machine rooms and storage units. The gardens were trampled under their careless boots.

They had systematically killed all of the Warlord's warriors. She could see the silhouettes of them dragging the lifeless bodies beyond the walls, feeding them to the forest.

Someone grabbed her arm with bruising force and hauled her to her feet. She weakly tried to pull away but was thwarted when a dress was yanked over her head, momentarily trapping her arms. Ophelia was let go. She stumbled back but remained upright; her eyes clenched shut until the stabbing pain in her head ebbed.

Another maiden stood shivering next to her. She peered at her, but it wasn't Allie. She took a step forward and grasped her sister. Hands came out to clutch her back.

"Are you okay?" Ophelia didn't know if the girl heard her or if her voice was gone but she did squeeze her in response. "It's going to be okay," she said mainly to herself. They huddled together until every girl was brought to their feet and dressed.

Like the walking dead, they were escorted by gunpoint and groping hands to a concealed clearing away from the mass of gang members. Her bare feet sank into crisp, fried blades of grass that had been charred by the electric fire from hours before.

She could hear the wails of one of the hags fade behind her followed by a gunshot. There was no more sound after that.

For the first time that day, she felt her eyes glisten with tears.



*What have I done?*

She caught sight of Allie as they were maneuvered into a line across the yard. Several Trentian men flanked her and settled her at the end. Ophelia found her feet take her forward but was roughly pulled back into the line.

*Several yards away. She's several yards away.* The men started to trickle out of the charred clearing; only a handful remained along the edges.

Ophelia couldn't see their faces but she knew what it felt like to be watched with such intensity that it prickled one's skin. Her ears popped and she could now hear the muffled cries of her sisters on either side of her. She reached out and grabbed their hands.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered. A quiet anticipation fell over them as, for the first time since the attack, nothing was happening. She looked around but could not discern any shadows or shifts. The sun was directly above them now and was moving toward dusk.

*It won't be much longer now.* She squeezed her sisters' hands on either side of her.

Ophelia tried to force away the pain in her head, she tried to clear the spotted glare in her eyes, and she tried to connect with Seraph.

A large man entered the scorched yard, followed by several men on either side of him, and the men who had stood watch over their frightened group moved out. She didn't like the giant silhouette of this new man. Even through her haze, she knew that he was the Usurper Warlord.

The leader of the howling savages who hollered at night outside the ward's walls and terrorized them with gunfire. The man who had broken through their impenetrable barrier, not once, but *twice*, even if the first time was now only in her memory.

He surveyed their trembling group and bellowed out in laughter. He walked up to the first girl and out of her sight,

all she heard were grunts and shrieks. The ravaging began.

"Hmph..."

"This one's tight."

"Hold her still. Hold her still!"

A heavy force hit her back. She had never felt anything like it. The ring on her finger grew heavy. *Seraph?*

The girl closest to her dug her nails into the back of her hand. The Usurper was slowly moving closer. His disgusting excitement grew as the cries of the women increased.

"This one's maidenhood is broken. Give her to the men."

The monster was getting louder as he progressed down the line. Toward her. Toward Allie at the end.

"Seraph?" Ophelia breathed. His presence was heavy and she thought she may collapse under the weight. His shadow was perched like an invisible monster on her back. *The day is still bright.* Confusion joined the pain in her head.

'*OPHELIA!*' The thought screamed into her head and she began to lose control of her body, as his shadow tried to possess her. '*LET ME KILL THEM.*'

*Seraph? Don't break open our worlds!* Pained tears came to her eyes. But he ignored her. She could sense the crackle of the barriers open up with him. A rush of fresh horror filled her as she saw Acheron's horse-headed, toothy form crawl toward the opening in her mind.

Her vision came back just as the Usurper's beady eyes came face-to-face with her. The girl next to her had collapsed in tears, dress ripped down the middle and arms held behind her back.

*Acheron's coming.*

'*LET ME KILL THEM!*'

*Protect my sisters. For my life. However long that lasts.*

"This one has pretty hair. A half-breed. She'll breed us a fresh legion of warriors." The Usurper grabbed her hair roughly and pulled up her skirts.

'*NO. THESE. MEN. WILL. DIE.*'

She couldn't focus. She shook her head, *Protection*.

Ophelia could see the crack through Seraph's eyes. It widened even further, allowing the mists to seep in. Acheron was dragging his emaciated form toward them with a bloody trail of enslavement in his wake. Thousands of manipulated souls floated behind him, attached like tiny, fine hairs to his back. Fear shot up her spine. Acheron was staring at her in hunger.

The Usurper's hand dug between her legs. 'OPHELIA!' Seraph's rage screamed as he forced his possession on her body.

*'DON'T MAKE ME DO IT!'*

Time hollowed out. The crack widened and Seraph pushed into her broken shell. She didn't even try to fight him. Her body jerked and her joints seized as he took her over. Acheron's mouth opened and his teeth sharpened in glee.

A splattering of blood hit her legs just as the Usurper took a step back: his hand was split in two. She felt Seraph corrupt his magic and bend it to his will. No one seemed to notice or care, forced to look away.

The Usurper held his cleaved hand away from his body with wide eyes and a subtle gasp of pain that only she heard.

The heathen leader walked like a zombie to the girl next to her, then on to the next maiden without touching them, until he ended up at Allie. He lifted her skirts with his other hand.

*Allie!*

Another Trentian male appeared before her and leered in glee. He said something she didn't hear but felt his tongue lick the tears off of her face. She saw Acheron's tongue slide over a trapped soul.

"This one is mine," the new male said.

Ophelia felt horrified as Seraph gathered his souls to him. Her body felt alive with power. The momentum

continued to build inside of her, coursing through her veins. The nails on her hands turned black and lengthened, and the mists of the netherworld filled her head.

*Seraph, he's touching Allie! STOP HIM!*

"Kill them all." Seraph forced the words from her lips in an eerie screech; he said them through her. A crescendo peaked and for a moment she was standing before a depthless black gate. It towered before her and blocked out the light. Seraph tore out of her body.

Acheron's deadly allure cleared from her head and the vision of the horse-headed beguiler crawling toward her and the black gate vanished with him. Time halted as the Trentian men stopped their assault and walked out of the clearing.

Their wills and desires manipulated. No one came back to guard them.

Seraph stood before her, a revenant of black ooze and malice. Heavy dark shadows swirled around him and he was lost within the cloak. It towered over her like a behemoth. *That was inside me . You're frightening me.*

He just stared at her, the only identifiable feature his yellow jackal eyes. Time sped back up as the day began to rapidly darken. The maidens scurried out of the clearing, seeming to not see or notice the dark figure; they helped each other and entered into the building behind them as if Hell hadn't just been released into their world.

"I'm not sorry." His voice was deep and low. She blinked. Her senses were back; she looked down at herself, the blisters and bruises had healed. Even her skin had cooled enough to counteract the heat-fever.

She took her first clean breath of the day and collapsed. Her legs crumpled up under her as her hands wiped at her eyes. Ophelia tried to stem the flow of tears.

Seraph appeared in front of her in the next instant and took her hands.

"I saw Acheron," she gasped. "He's coming."

"Yes. He's coming." She felt his mouth kiss her wrists before a cold, metal shape was placed in her palm. Seraph had given her a gun. "You need to leave."

"You manipulated me. You possessed me." Ophelia pulled her hands out of his grasp. "I want protection, for Allie and the others."

"What you tried to bargain for was not something I was willing to give you, for your life." He growled down at her. "They will die whether or not you will it. The tear is already made. It's been done. I told you not to banish me again! And you tried!" he screamed.

"We just had to wait until nightfall! They could have used me all they wanted, Seraph, it wouldn't have mattered."

"No one touches you." His voice filled with rage.

She shook her head and the tears flowed. "It's our fault."

"Yes. It is."

"How can we fix it?"

"You don't need to fix anything. You need to leave and let me handle the rest." His darkness overwhelmed her, "These aliens deserve what Acheron brings, but you don't."

*No, no, no.* "I won't leave without the others."

His shadows pulsed outward with violence. "Ophelia, you try my patience. I have men to kill... And now a friend to greet."

His anger fed her own. "What do you want *more*, Seraph? Me, away from the tear and the men? Or vengeance?" *Bargain with me.*

She felt his rage directed at her. "I want both."

"Then protect them, help me get my family out of here, help me save my friend," she pleaded. "You took my life. It has to be worth more than just death."

"They touched you, Ophelia," he said as shadows gathered around them.

"Please, Seraph," she begged. "I'm not asking you to *not* kill them. I'm asking you for coverage." She looked at the heavy gun in her hand. "My life for your protection."

"I want more than that to give up my vengeance."

Her face fell. "That is all I have left to bargain with."

A stifling silence fell between them. She couldn't stop the tears from falling and the more she tried, the more they fell. She wiped her eyes and sobbed. Everything was wrong, and no matter what she did, it only ever made things worse. The backs of her hands glistened with her sorrow and droplets gathered on the gun. Seraph crouched next to her and Ophelia could feel his fingers run through her hair.

The motion only despaired her more. "What about your love?" he asked cautiously. She couldn't look up at him; her heart hurt.

"You already have it," she said softly.

His cold hands came forward and cupped her face, forcing her eyes to meet his. She flinched as they drank in her despair. The darkness was gone around them and for the first time, she just saw the man beneath. Everything was stripped from him but his humanity. His thumbs rubbed the tears from her face.

"When?" He held her gaze.

"From the beginning, from the very beginning. I don't remember the beginning but I think I loved you from then." His arms came around her and she was pinned to his chest. Her ear was pressed to his heart but it didn't beat. It was dead, like he was, and it hurt her all the more.

*I wish he could love me back.*

"Your life then, for my protection," he breathed in her ear. Their final bargain solidified between them. His manipulated terms fell away. Seraph let go of her slowly and as his shadows grew outward and flowed around him, the man faded from her sight. "Leave now, take anyone who will go with you and follow the pathways from the gate that lead toward the port. The ship is still there, a man will be waiting outside the hatch. He will take you into the stars and away from here." Ophelia scrambled to her feet. Hope blossomed in her soul. "Ophelia, my protection won't last

and when it falls away, you will die.” His eyes flashed with anticipation. “Go as fast as you can. Go and save your friend.”

Panic made her heart race and she turned around to flee, but stopped short; Seraph was watching her. *He gave up his vengeance. He’s done it for me, and maybe for love, after all.* She turned around and flew into his arms. Her heart beat enough for the two of them. He clutched her back. “Thank you.”

“Go, I’ll be watching,” he urged, letting his arms drop. “I’ll be there at the end.” He tweaked the ring on her finger. “I’m only a shadow away.”

Ophelia flipped the safety on her gun and ran into the scorched commune to find Allie.

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Seraph watched Ophelia run out of the courtyard but his step faltered to go after her. Instead, he looked around at the now-vacant clearing and he felt his the gripping tendrils of rage return. He could hear the dishonorable, unwashed alien men beyond the wreckage and he could taste blood in his mouth.

Forced to watch her being beaten, leered at, and handled had left him chained to his hate. The song of the Great Below rang through his head. *I am done with this world.*

He could feel the jagged, gaping tear between their planes and the beings that now progressed toward it.

The sky above him faded into a Payne’s grey blue, a dull grey that sombered even the happiest of souls.

The darkness was on the horizon and the incoming clouds of night ran toward him like a lover.

He had Ophelia’s love. And it felt wrong wicked. *I have it freely. She loves me of her own free will.*

He wondered why the thought didn't dazzle him and instead unnerved him. Perhaps because there was nothing to love about him. *I'm infected with the singing discord of the Great Below, I have thousands of souls enslaved that I ignore and consume their essences when it pleases me, and I love a good bargain.*

*I'm not a Collector; I'm a Soul Slaver.*

He sensed Ophelia moving farther from him, making her way to the other maidens, to save *their* souls and it made him laugh. New and young and so full of morality and in love with a Collector. One who tainted the physical realm and had cracked it open.

*For her.*

*Because I'm selfish, the dead will come. It will take all of my power to seal the tear and it would hasten her death.* Seraph clenched his fist. *She will not forgive me if her friend doesn't live.*

The crackle of a bonfire roared to life somewhere beyond the clearing. *What am I going to do?* Every moment he gave was a moment through which Acheron had to crawl.

Ophelia was guiding a group of molested maidens through the broken rubbish now. His protection ensured they remained hidden. In a few moments, they would be within the red forest. For the first time since his initial transactions, he prayed, he urged. Not to a god, but to Ophelia.

*Run. Faster.*

His entire focus was on her as she punctured the tree-line, such that he didn't hear the squelch and crunch of footsteps approaching behind him until their creator made her presence known. The chaos of emotions, the sacrificial blood, the alien's riveted focus on him from behind.

"Knight of Xanteaus" —breathy reverence broke his concentration— "have you come here to save us?"

*Xanteaus?*



A terrible grin broke across his face and he turned around to address the alien.

*R*omana

The Knight of Xanteaus had stopped the Usurper Warlord and his Generals. She had watched Ophelia's face and knew he was speaking through her. Her vacant, glazed eyes were unfocused and oddly un-combative to the Usurper's groping aggression.

*The Knight used the hybrid vessel to manifest. Maybe her devotion to Xanteaus is stronger than mine?* Romana shook her head.

She had questioned the strange occurrence of their unguarded state and knew it was because Xanteaus had come to save them after all. That her love and her prayers had been heard over an endless universe of space by her god. The knight was here to prove their devotion to him, even on the outskirts of the Trentian-controlled cosmos.

And now he waited for her to approach him.

*I will prove to be a better servant than the half-breed.* She wiped the dirt on her hands with her hem but could not clean herself of the dried blood in her hair. *I have to be better.* Tears trickled from her eyes. *The child-maiden had not survived the morning.*

Even now, her sightless, burned corpse lay in the growing pile within the trees.

*Unjust, savage men! They will pay. Xanteaus will never allow you to resurrect again after the blatant, unprovoked murder of a fertile female. My maiden daughter. Her eyes burned with fiery rage.*

"My child, you can see me. You must be very devoted to our god." His words slithered in her ears like silk.

*Yes, I am.*

She stayed on her knees and kept her eyes downcast; she would not meet the eyes of a Knight without direction. "Are you here to save us, my Knight?"

Her breath sucked out of her lungs as he stepped closer to her form and kneeled. His divine body was shielded by an armor of obscurity, befitting a Knight of Xanteaus.

"That depends... Our people here have lost their way, they are no longer practicing the ways of Xanteaus... they have shunned his presence." Romana teared at his words.

"I have not, my Knight! I have remained vigilant even so far away from Xanteaus's Star," she said through her sorrow.

She shuddered as his hand touched her shoulder. *I have been blessed. I am now a priestess. Will he be my Knight? But he... had vesseled Ophelia...*

"You have overcome much and have stayed true to your faith, but I will need more than your word that you are as devout as you say you are to Xanteaus."

Romana gripped her dress between her tense hands. "How must I prove my devotion? I will do anything to prove my love for you."

A short pause answered her question. *I can feel his heavy gaze on me. Why do I feel like he does not trust my devotion? I have done nothing against my faith but be born away from the homeworld.* She twitched.

"You must give your soul to me," he admonished at last.

"My soul already belongs to my faith."

"Does it?"

Yes? "How do I prove that it does?"

She felt soft hands pet her hair in reassurance and the touch soothed. It cleared her head and made her focus on the world outside her bubble. More than anything, at that moment, she wanted to lift her head and look at the Knight that was comforting her.

*So very blessed.*

"Give me your soul, say the words in the light of the fading day, proclaim your love... solidify the words in the air, and it will prove your devotion."

His voice reassured her.

She sucked in a desperate breath. "I love Xanteaus. I give my soul and my devotion to him until my death, into the white-light after, and beyond to my future selves and resurrections." She felt *hope*. "I give him my eternity."

Her heart thudded erratically. *Will he be my Knight?* She lifted her eyes slightly as his dark cloak quivered.

"That is not enough."

*What? What have I done wrong? I love you!* Romana watched in horror as the Knight stood up and began to turn his back on her. *NO!* She fell forward and groveled.

"Please! I love you, you have my undying devotion, what must I do to prove it? Please, my Knight, don't turn your back on me. *Us*," she wailed.

"Us?" The way he said it, with disgust, killed her frail hope.

"Yes! Us" —she cried— "you touched me, d-does that not mean I am your priestess? Please don't leave me." *Please!*

The Knight of Xanteaus stopped his retreat and turned back toward her. She waited in terrified silence as he stood there judging her. *Have I assumed too much? Will he banish me from Xanteaus's love?*

"My priestess... Only... If you give your soul to *me*. I will not take a priestess who does not pronounce her devotion to Xanteaus through her Knight." The Knight paused. "Do that, and it will prove your love to Xanteaus *and* to me. Do that, and I will grant you a boon for your courage..."

Romana sunk her hands into the ruined terra. "I give my soul to you, my Knight of Xanteaus. To you alone, as your priestess, for eternity, I will be your vessel."

"I believe you," he answered. She felt empowered by his words. *Thank you. Thank you. Yes.* "And what would you have of me?" He came to stand before her again.

She thought about it. A boon... and her thoughts drifted to the corpse of the young maiden, her wide dead-eyed stare, killed in the violent attack this morning. Killed right before her eyes as fire and electricity corroded her body, her rifle knocked out of her hands.

Romana lifted herself up from the ground and back onto her knees, her head bowed in respect, she would see his face soon enough. "The boon, my Knight, is *you*. But if I had one other boon, I would want the faithless to pay for their crimes. Against my fellow maidens and for their lawless, unguided ways." She jerked as a heavy hand came down on her shoulder suddenly, just as her last words were uttered.

The air tightened around her and it created a sucking sensation as something strong bound her to the Knight before her. Her hand massaged her chest.

"We have a bargain." The Knight lifted away and his voice became hard. "I recommend leaving the commune, alien. We will meet again at the end."

*What?*

Romana looked up but her Knight was gone.

Seraph left the alien girl in the clearing and stood before the melted gates. He looked up at the darkening sky and felt at peace. *Maybe the alien god was listening*. But he felt no foreign presence nor the tugs of a *god-grip* holding him.

The heathens were blindingly entranced as he kept his hold on their minds and his protection on the fleeing maidens.

*And now I have the means to exact my vengeance. The faithless will pay.*

His face twisted as his lips widened into a frighteningly sinister grin. He watched as the planet's moon appeared in the twilight dark. The roaring fire blazed brighter deep within the ward, in the courtyard, where he had often watched Ophelia.

She was deep within the forest of corpses now.

Two women had knelt at his feet this evening. But only one of them owned him. The other he almost pitied. Her soul was strong and her request aligned with his desires. He would spare her. *Even though her ridiculous faith in her Xanteaus Knight is corrupted now. She will never see her alien god.*

He listened to the Trentian men clear debris, the taut woosh of cloth and leather for camps, the heavy footsteps throughout, and the pathetic cries of the civilians and maidens who were left behind or who did not follow Ophelia out.

The smell of cooked flesh and burned metal was overwhelming. *No one will be settling in for an evening meal tonight.*

The sun had almost set. A red glow appeared around him as the last strands of light fell through the trees. Seraph watched as several men walked through the gate, dragging a corpse behind them.

He solidified, walking over to them while bringing forth his spears, and gutted them before they registered his presence. The bodies quivered and crumpled to the ground.

He crossed his weapons and waited.

It wasn't long before the next set of men came through the opening. *Scouts perhaps.* He appeared before them with his spears skewered through their bellies, and lifted them up as they slid down their lengths with shrieks that fell on deaf ears. Their eyes were wide with shock as their souls left this world.

Seraph pulled away and waited. Corpses began to pile up around him and the stink of fear and excrement joined the scent of death.

The forest at his back was now as black as the night. The glows of the fires and the subtle illumination of electronics were the only light left. He blended in with the dark as if he were a part of it. One being, that made up an endless universe of beings that made up the darkness, together blocking out the light.

More came, guns at the ready. *They're beginning to notice.* Their heads fell just as their firearms burst with frenzied bullets. An alarm was raised and he finally made his way through the gates.

*Time to die.*

---

Ophelia ran through the forest, her feet following the path that led to the port. *I can sense his urgency. Faster. Faster. Run.* Desperation and fear choked her lungs.

Her sisters trailed behind her, and she had to continuously slow down to urge them on. Their urgency fed off of hers but they did not have the same fears that she had. *Any moment now, Seraph's power could fade, Acheron could break through. I could die at any moment.* She gripped the gun tighter in one hand while her other was clasped around Allie's wrist.

They had come across many Trentian corpses on the roadside. The high walls of their former life felt like a monster at their back, with the giant bonfire casting the shadows of the walls, the trees, their bodies before them. It only seemed to get bigger and longer with each step.

"Stop!" a girl behind her yelled. Ophelia bit her lip and turned back.

"We can't stop," she urged. "We need to get to the ship."

A girl in a tattered dress stumbled before her. "How do you know it'll be safe there?" She looked behind her in fear. "Why are they not following us?"

They had questioned her at length before, until she had gotten them out of the commune, a feat she did not do herself but let them believe. Beyond the walls was freedom and the questions had stopped as the taste of it was enough to awe most of them into silence.

The thought of getting lost in the world was a great one.

Ophelia shook her head. *I have to convince them.* The forest was quiet around them now that they had run some distance, but the smell of death and destruction followed. "I... overheard one of the Warlord's warriors last night speak of it," she lied.



Another girl, hunched over, her hair in strands around her face, came forward. "You went near the men? At night?"

She wanted to scream at them. *Can't they see that we need to move?!* Allie looked at her expectantly, knowing she lied. But she had seen Seraph, if for just a moment, and didn't question her.

"I didn't. I *overheard* . Please, we need to keep moving." She turned away, her hand still latched on to her friend and began to jog down the dark path.

"You could be leading us to our deaths," one called after her.

"Argue with me while we move! Unless you would like to wait here for the Usurper's men to finish the job." Her threats were terrible but warranted. The thought even brought a shudder down her spine and she felt her friend stiffen beside her.

The clatter of soft footsteps on dirt sounded behind her and she picked up speed.

Her friend rattled and gasped next to her, "Will the ship really save us?" Several muddled females caught up to them and listened. *Let them know. I'm the only one offering them an option, one of the only options they have ever had.*

"It will take us off the planet and away from this constant rival warring."

"Do you know where it will take us?" a girl who struggled forward, yet stayed in step next to her, asked. She wondered that herself. *But I'll never see the end.* It saddened her, so she held Allie's arm tighter.

They were running on adrenaline and fear. Ophelia was the only one who had been healed of her wounds. She missed Seraph's presence but could feel his protection snake around her. She knew where he was, avenging them. And she couldn't bring herself to care. *Let him have his death.*

"I don't know," she panted between breaths. The swoosh of wings sounded overhead, sudden and frightening. She tripped over her feet and hit the ground, losing her grip on her friend.

Ophelia looked up at the winged creatures and her focus dimmed. She remembered this. Fleeing through a forest. Her mouth hung open as the flyers faded into the dark overhanging branches. An ancient tree, scary yellow eyes, and incredible pain. She dropped her gun and clutched her stomach.

"Are you okay?" Allie hovered in front of her, her eyes glazed in the dark, blinded by her Earthian genes.

She looked down at herself, expecting to see her body drenched in blood, but only found a dirtied dress. She shook her head. Another girl came to her side and grabbed her upper arm and hefted her off the ground. "I'm okay," Ophelia choked out.

"You said we need to keep moving."

Her imaginary pain ebbed and they sprang forward in unison, her gun forgotten.

They ran for a time and she began to notice their numbers drop. She had rallied nearly all of her sisters and several civilians, but as she glanced behind her, barely more than a dozen remained. Her hand still guided Allie beside her and she glanced at those who took a chance on her words... and decided. She wouldn't turn around. *I will not risk my sisters who believe in me.*

Her guilt increased tenfold as the screams of dying men rose behind her. They stumbled to a stop and looked back.

"What's happening back there?" Allie's questioned was laced with fear.

"They're dying."

"Or they realize we're gone," another maiden answered.

Ophelia stilled. She watched the illumination of flames glow atop the outline of the wall in the far distance. *They don't know yet.*

*Faster.*

"Let's go!" And their feet flew over the forest floor.

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He stood before the bonfire, having dragged his fresh kills to the flames, to feed the fire and erase his presence. Seraph had walked through the middle of the camp and drew the men to him in a frenetic free-for-all. The bullets they released shot through his form. The machetes they wielded never met with his spears. The fists that swung at him never made contact with his flesh.

But the idiots could not trust their sight in the shadowy dark, and even an alien's night-sight could not break through his cloak of dark and shade.

Two men lay on the ground before him in fear, their bodies held to the ground by his will.

"I'm saving you for last." He grabbed the Usurper's throat and dug his black nails into the alien's pasty skin. He felt the muscles swallow and contract under his hand before he tossed him away in disgust.

Seraph threw his spear at a man just coming through the door of the dormitory. It pinned him to the stone frame with a shriek and shudder. He watched the male struggle like a hooked fish until he bled out against the wall. When his eyes hooded, he drew his spear back to his hand.

It pulsed a deep purple, his silver-shaded magic mixed with red death. He walked over to the corpse to gather it to his growing fire-fodder but came up short. *I can hear strangled noises.* His attention deviated to the sounds deep within the dormitory.

He followed the sounds and routed out the men barricaded within, hiding in the rooms. Seraph systematically went through each door and flushed the

rooms of life. Their souls sank into the ground in varying shades of blush and rose.

*Don't show up in my ether or your torment will continue far beyond the timed-decay of the physical realm.*

Acheron was only a minor monster compared to what really wandered the mists. Eaters, Deceivers, and Gods that either ignored the song of the Great Below or worked for it from the outside.

A large wooden door appeared before him at the end of the first-floor hall. Seraph stilled and listened through the heavy wood. His ears were met with whimpers and thudding pulses.

"It's quiet? Do you think the fighting is over?" a child whispered.

"Shhh..."

"It's too quiet." Seraph heard a man cock his gun on the other side of the door with slow, silent, movements.

"Resler, *please* ," a feminine voice begged. "Don't open that door."

*Hmm.* Seraph shot his hand through the door and grabbed the man's gun, crushing it in his grip before letting it drop. The female cried out. The Trentian fell back, "What the—"

He broke through the door, splintering the wood just as the haggard group scrambled back into the hidden corners within. Several shots went through him as he entered the dusty room. He shot his spear outward as it erupted into electric flames and their dirtied faces flinched away. One man—*Resler perhaps* —stood before the others in a defensive crouch.

Seraph surveyed the group, several maidens were amongst the children and there were others, the pregnant female from earlier was amongst them. Her arms were draped around several young boys next to her.

"What are you?" the young man asked in fear.

Ignoring his question, "Are you faithless?" He pointed his needle at the alien, directing his question.

His eyes bulged, the flame reflected in the gloss of his pupils. "N-no." *Good enough for me.*

Seraph turned to the maiden. "Is he keeping you here? Or is he with you?" She stood up and shielded the children.

"He's with us." She moved forward. "Have you come to save us?"

The young Trentian warrior stepped between him and the girl. Seraph canted his head and smiled. *Too bad he can't see my teeth.*

He addressed the naively protective warrior. "I suggest you take your charges away from here and stay with her." Flicking his spear toward the two, "She's the only one who can save you."

The young male straightened up with courage. "I can protect them." The alien lifted his head and looked beyond him and to the open, dark door. "What about the gang? Is it safe to leave?"

Seraph chortled. "It's not safe, at all, in fact it's incredibly dangerous. But if you stay here you will die. You don't want to be here when the real horror comes."

"What's coming?" The girl turned away and took hold of the cowering children. "We need to go."

"You're just going to listen to a black shadow?" Resler turned his shoulder toward the female. "What are *you* ?" The male's eyes squinted at him.

"He's an angel." The girl stepped toward him, around the young warrior, pulling the children with her. She stood before Seraph without fear. "Where should we go?"

"As far away from here as possible." He looked down at her, amused. *Angel?*

"What can be *horrible* to an angel?" her question sucked the air out of the room. Seraph leaned forward and flashed his yellow eyes at her.

"A sociopath." His sharp smile widened.

The maiden stepped back.

He turned around and walked back to the fire. The soft sounds of movements followed him into the open night. The girl cooed to the children to keep their eyes forward and their fear ratcheted up by degrees when they stepped out of the building. The fire grew higher, fueled by the dead and the cracking mists of the ether seeping into the world.

His hand shot out and grabbed the young man's neck. "Why should I spare you?" his voice low.

The Trentian stiffened and braced for an attack. "I was never loyal to the Usurper. My sister was within these walls."

"The maidens have fled. You may still find her yet." He let go of the male.

"Do you know where she is?" his voice cracked.

"You would have to sell me your soul for that information."

The Trentian male backed away, eyes wide, and rejoined the frightened group. Seraph watched as the alien picked up several discarded guns on the ground and ushered them to the cleared paths.

Seraph walked back to his two disgusting captives, tethered to the ruined ground. He heard the group scurry from him and into the night, through the gaping gate, and beyond his care.

The struggling, brutish men stilled when his shadow appeared over them, blocking out the fire. He had kept them close to the flames so their blood could slowly boil into heat-fever. *Feel what Ophelia felt.*

The skin on their faces was pulled taut with dehydration. He struck his spears into the dirt and hunched over the Usurper.

Seraph grabbed the man's blood-caked hair and gave him his most insidious grin. A wad of spit struck his face as the subdued leader struggled to keep his pride. Seraph didn't move, letting the saliva drip down his face and drop

back onto the Trentain cretin. Still keeping the man's eyes locked on his, he sliced his good hand off.

The man screamed.

"Now, what are you going to do with no hands?" Seraph lifted up and taunted, listening to the howling pain. "You'll never be able to touch a female again." The other man thrashed in fear next to him. He picked up his spear from the ground and stabbed the Usurper through the throat, instantly quieting the ward. Blood bubbled from his mouth as his body relaxed into death.

*Sigh.*

His soul gushed out with it, red and wet, and splattered into the dirt. He picked up the hand and tossed it into the roaring flames.

The next instant, he straddled the second male. His fear-inducing smile returned.

"What do you want?" the alien tried to plea.

"Your tongue."

"P-please, I'll do anything, I'll give you anything," he begged.

Seraph grabbed the man's jaw and ripped his mouth open. He dug his hand in, feeling the Trentian's teeth break from the intrusion, and pulled out his tongue. "I'm in no mood to bargain." A dagger formed in his other hand and he sliced off the muscular organ.

The alien retched and choked. Gristle and groans spilled out. He threw the tongue into the fire behind him. "That's for licking her." *His tongue had touched her lips.* The man pitched on the ground, unable to rise.

Acheron appeared behind him, the cold smell of the ether strong on his body.

A series of slow claps sounded. *Clap...clap...clap...* "You're really nurturing the Gardens tonight, Seraph."

"Acheron," he admonished in greeting and turned to face him. "It took you long enough. Have trouble getting through?" The wails of the man behind him were forgotten.

Acheron was crouched on a pile of broken metal. His inhuman form nor his bewitching female disguise greeted him, and instead, Acheron was just a man dressed in cloth, his chest bare.

His hair remained the same but took on a deep garnet color that fell in sleek lengths over his shoulders and chest; his eyes twinkled a russet hue in the fire-light. "Hmm, I had to ensure I was the only one to make it through." Acheron dropped down from his metal perch. "Speaking of which..."

Thousands of tiny little white hairs grew from his ghostly hands and slithered throughout the ward. Seraph watched as the soul strings weaved together and repaired the tear between their realms as if it were a piece of cloth to be mended. When it was done, the strands broke away from Acheron's hands and faded into the night.

*You've just sealed your fate, Contractor.*

"There. That's better." The man surveyed the entire destruction of the commune with interest. Clicking his tongue, "Tsk. Tsk. You've been having some fun. Save any for me?" The trembling alien at their feet stopped moving at his words. It only brought Acheron's gaze down to him faster. He nudged the Trentian with his foot.

Seraph brought his weapons to him and pulled them back within his palms. "So you have been watching me."

"I have." Acheron kept nudging the man at his feet, watching him writhe away from the attention. "Your love for the alien girl was going to make you mess up. It was only a matter of time, and you know... we have plenty of that on our hands." Acheron walked around in a circle, examining his surroundings. "You knew I was coming, so why didn't you repair the fissure before I made it through?"

"This world deserves you." Seraph shrugged. "I didn't want to waste reserves." He paused. "You also deserve this place." The bloat of waxen corpses surrounded them and the smell of everything hellish perfumed the air. *A perfect place for a creature like Acheron. If he wanted a life so*



*badly, let him have one on a barely habitable planet. With a short supply of primitive locals.*

He watched Acheron walk away and lift something off the ground; he came back to the fire with a bronze cane twirling in his hands.

"So. We're not going to fight, you and I? I'm very disappointed."

"No. We're not going to fight." Seraph grabbed the Trentian man from under his shoulders. "Would you like to help me out with this?" He smirked.

Acheron grabbed the man's thrashing legs, and together they threw his guttural, panicked body into the bonfire. They watched in companionable silence as the man died.

"He was a rapist."

"Hmm. He would have been very easy to beguile, what a loss."

Seraph and Acheron looked up into the night sky, now glowing with the early tendrils of grey-dawn, just as a the terra shook beneath them. A moment later, a large ship lifted high into the air, picking up speed, and with a roar that could wake the dead, it blasted into space.

He could feel Ophelia's presence diminish.

Seraph watched the glinting chrome structure until it vanished beyond a speck far into the distance. *I would have liked to have flown one of those had I been born into this age.*

"Hmm," Acheron turned away, spinning the cane with his hands. His face was pensive in thought.

"They will come for you."

Acheron's cackle filled the quiet early morning. "Only if the Gates open up and spill forth their froth. Little ol' me wouldn't be worth the effort." He laughed softly. "Let them try."

Seraph looked at the beguiler, vaguely curious about Acheron's motivations. The first rays of light streaked

across the land and the shadows gave way to heavy plumes of smoke.

"Do you hear a song?" He dragged another corpse to the dying fire. The red-headed devil helped for a short time in their waste management task.

Acheron wiped off charred gore on his pants. "Sometimes."

"Is that why you broke through?"

The beguiler tied his hair back loosely with a strip of cloth. "I *walked* through. I'm bored, angel, changes are happening here in the physical realm and we're just stuck in the mists watching and waiting for it to happen." They lifted a particularly large Trentian and hefted him into the weak embers. The orange flared for several minutes longer as it consumed the new corpse. "Nothing is more frightening than boredom."

His gleeful snickers could make the reaper turn over. They stopped their companionable musings when a delicate presence entered their midst.

A ghost of a girl stood, quivering by the damaged wall, just beyond the clouds of smoke. Her feet were caked in mud and dirt and the stains of such soiling trailed up the hem of her once white dress. It was his 'priestess' from before.

*Idiot should have run. This is how malevolent spirits are made.*

Acheron eyed the wraith with interest. "It looks like you brought me a gift after all." They stood there staring at the flimsy, fidgeting alien for some time before she stepped forward and approached them. She had shorn her white hair off at the nape, the ends blunt and jagged.

The maiden walked, staring at nothing but him, completely unaware of the carnage under her feet. When she stopped with a stumble several yards before them, her eyes regained some of their life, as if she had been under an enchantment prior.

Her gaze slipped to Acheron and her pupils dilated. Acheron wasn't smiling anymore, but intense, eyes flared.

"Of course her soul already belongs to you, Seraph, all the aliens must love you," his voice deep and frustrated. The girl shivered at his words and turned her attention back to Seraph.

"You're not a Knight of Xanteaus. You're Earthian," her exclamation breezed through the air. Acheron circled around them, leering at their exchange. Interest painted his pale face.

"I never said I was."

The maiden's face went an even paler shade of ghost. "You led me to believe... what *are* you?"

"I'm the one who answered."

Her face blanked. "You're not a Knight of Xanteaus," she repeated numbly.

Acheron was standing behind the fragile girl now, and Seraph watched as he leaned forward and sniffed her hair. The maiden shifted so her back was no longer to Acheron. *Smart girl.*

He felt a pull from Ophelia; the missing part of his soul was coaxing him back to her.

"What's your name, *my swallow?*" Acheron addressed her.

Seraph flexed his hands and closed his eyes, drowning out Acheron and the girl's exchange. One bargain had been completed but his power continued to drain with each disruption and contract. He looked around at the commune one last time; no morning diamonds or alien foliage met his eyes this time. His enjoyment had left with Ophelia.

Seraph turned to the final maiden and smiled. She was blatantly ignoring Acheron's curiosity. He reached down and picked up a gun, removed from the Usurper earlier, and handed it to her. "I suggest you leave this place now. Our bargain has concluded."

She twitched at his words, and her gaze turned to the charred corpses now buried in embers.

“Good.”

Seraph faded his form to go to Ophelia but stopped short as Acheron got in his face. “You’re just going to leave me here?”

“Yes.”

And he left just as Romana lifted her gun to Acheron’s head.

Ophelia stood in front of the captain just before the hatch. It was nearly dawn now and she and the maidens who had remained with her were delirious from pain and exhaustion.

They had run all night, braving the darkness, the ghostly wails of death behind them, and the fear of what the future would bring. Less than a dozen now remained with her and Allie.

The tall man before her was another hybrid, like herself; she had not seen once since her incarceration in the commune. His face was hard and scarred, with the crinkles of wariness around his eyes. He looked aged beyond his years, his hair golden and peppered with streaks of Trentian white.

She could feel Seraph's manipulation hold him. His eyes were glazed yet lucid as if his manipulation was not needed. *This man would have helped our plight regardless.*

"We seek refuge."

"We've been waiting for you," he answered in return. Another male stepped forward from the ship, his worn, beige jacket loose around his frame.

"Solm, this is a bad idea. We don't smuggle breeders," he hissed. "We don't do things for free."

A giant billow of smoke trailed ominously behind them, ascending in the air, deep where the ward was. The captain and his crewmate watched with indifference. Ophelia watched them watch the horizon with anxiety. When she looked back, she didn't see smoke rising from the forest, but the cold mists of the ether taking over.

"We're off schedule already as it is." The exasperation was evident in the other male's voice.

*So are we.*

The captain clearly ignored him. "Well, waifs, get in. It's time to get off this forgotten planet." He ushered them in, his eyes still on the smoke. He called to the crew from a techno-band that glowed green on his wrist. "Get the girls to medbay and treat their wounds, they're pretty wrecked." Several other crew members greeted them at the hatch and Ophelia felt marginally less wary when some of them appeared to be women.

She stepped through the hatch and into a new world. The captain and his mate trailed behind their wayward group. She listened to the crewmember talk in hushed tones.

"Larik is not going to like this, Solm, we smuggle contraband, *not* women."

"This planet isn't governed by any council, there will be no harm in taking them away from this place."

A grumbling sigh, "This isn't like you. I hope you know what you're doing." The crew member sped up and walked around their group and disappeared deeper into the ship.

Ophelia flinched and looked down, the grates in the metallic passageway bit into her torn feet. She moved to the side where the floors were flat, she noticed several of the other girls ahead of her do the same.

Some of the crew members eyed them with curiosity, but most remained intent on their tasks. Ophelia looked around for any places a shadow could hide but the walls were

streaked with long, glowing lights; they brightened the tubular pathways with perfected clarity.

She reached out ahead of her and grabbed Allie's arm, needing the contact of familiarity.

*Have I done the right thing?* She could hear the heavy footsteps of the half-breed captain directly behind her.

"Through here." They were ushered into an even brighter metallic room with capsules, pallets that extended from the walls, and a myriad of what she thought might be medical instruments. There was a series of seats in an adjoining room that they were led into. "Sit."

The other maidens hesitated until Allie clambered onto a seat; her tired courage compelled the others to comply. Soon even several crew members, dressed in grey suits, joined them. Straps came out of the walls and tightened around them. Several of the girls mewed in fear.

"Take-off procedures." A female member, with strange silver tattoos, exclaimed across from them. "This is where the medical staff and its patients strap in."

Exhaustion and tension settled in. *Now I'm not the only one suffering from sleep deprivation.* Ophelia looked out over her sisters: all of them were in different stages of sullen hysteria. Allie's hand grabbed ahold of her tense fingers, her eyes closed tightly.

"Where are you taking us?"

"Wherever the captain decides," the woman answered cryptically. They sat in silence for several minutes before the ship hummed to life around her.

*I'm inside a live machine.* The thought was exhilarating. Ophelia felt her stomach bottom out and the pressure increase around her. Her jaw clenched tight.

And then the bubble popped and a feeling of weightlessness took over. The tattered dress around her began to float up and her body lifted slightly from the seat before everything rocked down abruptly and the weightless feeling vanished.

*We made it.*

The straps sunk back into the walls and they were handed white cloths. They wiped themselves down in quiet enthusiasm, the cloths evaporating the grime off of their skins. The woman with silver tattoos took the towelettes back and stepped out just as a light spray descended from the ceiling.

Whatever the spray was, it sedated them into a bleak sleep.

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She woke up some unknowable time later, feeling worse than she did before. *It's very quiet.* Her eyes snapped open, thinking she was dead. The yellow of Seraph's eyes filled her vision.

Ophelia jerked upward, startled and momentarily disorientated. She was caught in his arms.

"Calm down," he breathed into her ear. Her arms clung to him like a sanity-line. She burrowed her aching eyes into his chest and inhaled his shadows until her fear faded. Ophelia looked down at herself and noticed her body had healed, the gashes on her feet gone, and that she was dressed in a very loose suit.

Seraph's long fingers brushed through her hair.

It was then, when she lifted her head, that she noticed they were in a small alcove of a room with a cushioned bed that extended like a slat from a cold, metal wall. The room was barely big enough for Seraph and her to be in together. There was a triangular view-glass opposite a rounded, shut door that had a holographic, glowing pad on the wall next to it.

"My head hurts. Where are we? What happened?" she murmured and rubbed her knuckles over her forehead.



"You're in my arms, on a spaceship, and your commune is no more." He gripped her upper arm and hauled her off the bed. "Come look." Nodding his head toward the layered, crystalline glass. Ophelia righted herself and sucked in a breath as a rainbow nebula of stars came into view. The pain in her was head forgotten.

"Seraph, they look like souls." She felt him rest his chin on her shoulder and peer out at the endless void with her.

"They're more beautiful."

"Why do say that?" She leaned into him. His body was cold, comforting. *When had he gone from a warm touch to the chilly feel of early morning dew?*

"They're singular, poignant, and cannot be controlled. There is purity and light, an endless beacon to the mysterious beyond. When one dies, another takes its place." His lips caressed her cheek. "And if you get close to one, it'll kill you."

"They also twinkle." Ophelia smiled.

"They do. Did you know you can make a wish on a star? A shooting one to be exact..." He trailed off for a moment, "Or if you're unable to, on Earth, you can wish on a star known as the 'Northern Star.' It's a far more innocent way to make your dreams come true, but far less effective. *I'm* far more effective." He laughed. "Falling stars use to be viewed as falling souls."

"It would be amazing if one could become a Collector of Stars." She looked down at the hazy band on her finger. Seraph caught her hand and kissed her wrist.

"You're always lured away from me by beauty."

"Only because it reminds me of you." She succumbed when he lifted her into his arms and sat with her on the small slat of bed. It didn't creak from their weight like the one in her room. Ophelia's eyes darkened. *My old room.* She curled up on his lap.

"I'm the one who is supposed to woo your heart with beautiful verses and poetry."

"You've already wooed me." *I love you.* "And you kept your end of the bargain," she murmured. "You're in my bed tonight."

His fingers continued to comb through her strands, soothing her mind. "They knocked you out in the medical room. I have been here, watching over you for more than a day."

She pushed away, "That long? We still have your protection?"

"Yes."

"How has your power lasted so long? What happened? Did you repair the tear?" Her voice lowered, "Did Acheron make it through?"

Seraph's sigh was heavy, "So many questions, Ophelia." He tightened his arms around her. "The fissure is fixed and Acheron has been taken care of. I would rather talk about the stars."

"Not everyone made it onto the ship. Did anyone survive? Besides us?" Worry squeezed her throat, her mind drifted back to the forest, the smoke, the ashen destruction of her former home. *So much death.*

"Many fled."

*Fled where?*

Ophelia's hands came up and pulled her hair, gripping it until her eyes watered and Seraph captured her hands between them. "It's all my fault," she said, her words damning.

"Why do you say that? All you have tried to do is take care of your sisters. All you can do is try." He steadied her hands; his fingers cold and forceful. "Take care of yourself for once. Sometimes you have to let nature take its course. When you disrupt the neutral balance too much, it disrupts itself right back."

She leaned forward and rested her forehead on his hard chest. "I'm afraid, Seraph."

"What is it that you're afraid of?" He caught her eyes.

“Of what comes next.”

Her heart fluttered when he rested her against him and covered them in his shadows. She felt his lips trace kisses over the top of her head as she set her head against his heart. “Try and get some sleep.” He caressed her from deep within and she felt her eyes flutter shut. “Try not to think about it.” A slight, expectant pause followed. “You’ll know what to do when you awaken.”

“Every time I sleep, something bad happens,” Ophelia mumbled.

“Not when I’m watching you.”

“Will you be there at the end?”

“Yes. And for the endless, infinite eternity afterward.”

*I love you.*

“ O phelia, wake up.”

A happy, light-hearted voice slithered through her subconscious self to insert itself into her thoughts. Her night of pleasantly empty dreams cleared from her head as her body slowly woke up. She curled into the cool cloth of her bed, knowing where she was this time around, knowing that Seraph was no longer curled around her, but the chill of his body remained.

“Allie?” She opened her eyes to the Earthian’s exotically beautiful features. Her friend smiled and climbed into her padded transporter cot, replacing Seraph’s cold traces with her body heat. Their hands entwined.

“You saved us.”

“I tried. I hope I did but...” She trailed off. “I don’t think I saved us at all.” *Nature demands sacrifice.* Ophelia shivered.

“You did though.” She watched Allie look around the room. *Just like I do. She’s looking for him.* Ophelia tugged her friend’s hand, bringing her attention back to her.

“How are the others doing?”

“The sisters are adjusting.” Allie’s wandering eyes settled on their hands. “Sasha has found an admirer and some of the others have begun finding their places with the

crew. Did you know we're on a ship filled with contraband?" Allie giggled. "They're pirates, *space* pirates. They have weapons, drugs, 'information,' and now us!"

"Pirates?"

"That's what they call themselves. Maybe we can join them and become pirates ourselves." Allie's mirth was infectious. Ophelia grinned.

"I'm sorry I've been sleeping through everything," she admitted. "Do you know where they are taking us?"

"I'm not sure, I think they're waiting for an interception from another ship? The crew has been tight-lipped. They think we're simple." Allie's eyes slitted with worry. Her mouth opened and closed as if she was trying to find words. "Some of the crew appear anxious. We have a guard right outside our cubicles." Allie turned around and looked over the room again.

Ophelia leaned up on her elbow and lured her attention back. "Anxious about what?"

Allie tugged her hair, "Deep space. Dead space... Abyss space, something about being on the fringes of the network's reach. We're not allowed access to most of the ship, and not without an escort, but Sasha's admirer... tells us things."

*Things?* "What things?"

Allie took a moment to answer. "Vanishing ships." She shivered. "Never to be seen or heard from again. Like space has swallowed them up."

"That sounds horrifying." She paused. "Are you okay?" Ophelia squeezed her hand.

Allie shook her head. "Are you? You haven't left your cubicle."

"I don't... know. I have a lot on my mind." A tense silence settled between them. Her friend looked on the verge of tears. "What's wrong?"

"He chose me, Ophelia, the Usurper chose me." Allie twitched with revulsion. "He hurt every maiden, knowing he

was going to choose me at the end, regardless. He touched you. His generals groped us. They touched you." The sparkle of tears formed in her eyes. "Some of the sisters-mates were violated." She gasped sadly, "I'm so sorry."

Ophelia grabbed her friend and pulled her into a bruising hug. Her teeth clenched. "I'm the one that should be sorry. You don't even know how sorry I should be."

"If he had taken me I would have killed him, I would have found a way to kill him." Allie's voice grew dark. "He got what he deserved."

Ophelia bit her tongue, "What do you mean?"

Allie ignored her. "Do you know why he did it?"

She shook her head.

"The reigning Warlord would not grant him one of us to breed his children." Allie tugged her hair, "so he took us all."

"Allie." Ophelia repeated herself, "What do you mean, he got what he deserved?"

"Your shade split his hand in two." Her eyes glazed over, "He didn't follow us into the forest... and the screams. They were shrieks *for* death, not because of it. I hope he avenged us." Allie's voice went low, "Is he dead?"

Ophelia watched her friend as her face went dark. The carefree girl from several minutes ago had become something unrecognizable and hard.

Ophelia ignored her question. "Remember when I asked you if you would sell your soul?"

Allie's fingers dug into hers. "Yes."

*I'm so sorry, Allie.*

Ophelia glanced up and saw Seraph's dark presence flicker and waver behind her friend. His yellow eyes glinted and she caught a devious smile before his shadows shifted and hid it.

"Do you love me? Do you trust me?" Her hand came up and petted her friend's long golden-brown hair, her fingers threaded through the silken locks. Seraph hovered in the

corner like an expectant blight. His presence was obscenely out of place on the spaceship.

*Our time is almost up.*

"Yes, more than anything," Allie insisted.

"Then I need to you prove it." Her voice was soft and sad. *Just like Seraph told me. I know what to do.* Ophelia could feel an indescribable shudder in the vessel. "We belong together."

"Are *you* okay?" Allie's eyes clouded with worry. "We'll always be together."

Ophelia pulled her hand, locked with her friend's hand, up between their faces. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"We can spend eternity together, we can go on hundreds of adventures, nothing could ever touch us," she urged desperately.

Allie shook her head in confusion. "I would like that." A small smile lifted her worried face.

"Would you give your soul up for that? To me, to protect?" The ship shook and a small vibration made the bright lights of the walls flicker. Seraph hovered in anticipatory silence in the corner.

"I... why?"

"Because I love you. Because eternity is a long time to spend without you."

"If it means we could be together, forever, I would give my soul to you." Allie laughed lightly, unknowingly.

Ophelia closed her eyes and willed away her tears. "We can. I'll protect you forever."

*Goodbye, Allie.*

"I know you will." Her laughter grew softer as she realized their conversation was not a lighthearted one. She watched as her friend's face fell and her mouth parted open to release a shallow breath. Allie's eyes widened and she spun around. Her face clashing with Seraph's an instant later. "I don't understand." She jolted backward in horror.

Ophelia grabbed Allie's arm, fighting off her struggles, and looked at her shadow. "Is that good enough?"

"Yes. Now we tether her." Seraph grinned, and for a moment she saw sharp teeth and long black claws appear before he became a cloak of shade and possessed her body.

She let him in with ease and with his help they forced their contract, her grip on Allie tightening as she struggled and shrieked until something stronger than the physical took its place. The air hollowed out as their contract solidified.

Allie jerked in fear, tears streaming from her eyes, her struggling ceased. "No." Her voice filled with sadness.

"Forever, Allie."

Seraph's waning power pulsed from her hand and directly into Allie. Ophelia watched as her friend's eyes glazed over and blinked closed. She slumped onto the bed and Ophelia caught her body against hers. *It's for the best.*

She felt Seraph's darkness slither out of her, like a heavy breath of fresh air, to stand over them. Their eyes locked.

"Make her forget. Make her forget this, make her forget like how you made me forget." He turned his eyes toward Allie's unconscious body.

Seraph studied her friend, his focus intense.

"I don't want her to remember," she urged.

The next moment, Ophelia slammed hard against the wall as a horrible, tearing roar rang through the pirate ship. Immediately after, a deafening wail of sirens filled the metallic vessel echoing off the walls with endless vibrations. She clambered off the bed as the door to her alcove slid open.

She shared a look with Seraph, stopping him from helping her. He turned toward her friend.

Her back hit the wall as Seraph leaned over Allie and pulled little, glowing strings out of her head. *Memories.* She watched in morbid fascination as he tore them apart and



sniffed them. The strands either sunk back into Allie's body or detached and vanished into his fingers.

Her eyes widened as her friend convulsed and seized, her face distorted and cringing from the perverse mutilation. Ophelia closed her eyes and tried to drown out the chaos. Beyond the doors, the beats of heavy steps sounded as people ran by.

"We've been hit!"

"Get to the escape pods!" The shrieks of several of the other maidens could be heard as they began to evacuate the space.

*It's almost over.* Ophelia couldn't stop her heart from pounding. A scream caught her attention and she grabbed the doorframe. She looked out just in time for the vessel to depressurize and tremble under her feet. The force of outward gravity weighed down around her. Her skin tightened and heated as it lifted just as quickly.

*His protection is diminishing.*

The flash of a body flew by as the ship lost its internal field. The wail and shrieks of bodies sounded down the corridor as they flew into the walls. Like scattered pebbles.

Ophelia grasped the metal doorway and held on tightly. Her feet lifted off the ground, hair plastered to her face.

She looked up to see Seraph still hovering over her friend, who remained protected and bubbled on the bed. Tears whipped from her eyes.

Outside the viewing glass, all she saw was a myriad of brown and gold moving closer every second.

Seraph turned around and reached for her. She lifted her hand to be caught, and the tips of their fingers touched just as the ship went into a nosedive.

"NO!"

Ophelia lost her grip and flew back, slamming into the wall opposite her, feeling the crunch of bones throughout her body. She ricocheted off the walls, her form splintering.

*I deserve this.* She laughed softly with a gasping, bubbling rasp.

The ship's lights powered down and she was in perfect darkness. The fragmenting and thunder of impacting metal enveloped her. Seraph's protection finally faltered and the pain finally ceased.

---

Seraph reached her just as she died.

*It wasn't supposed to happen like this.*

A fissure bolted out around him as he forced himself to stay within her realm. His presence was no longer accepted now that hers was gone. The song of the Great Below was shrill in his mind.

He gritted his teeth and lifted her crumpled body from the wreckage. "I can't heal you this time, Ophelia." Seraph kissed the top of her head as the tear crackled around him.

Seraph watched the seams untie with uncaring exhaustion. *I have nothing left within me to fix this. It doesn't even matter anymore. I hope this world goes to Hell.* His fingers tensed around her form and he closed his eyes and pictured the ancient, vermillion tree.

The smell of burnt metal lifted and it was replaced with wet musk and soil. His feet sank into the ruddy terra of where he and Ophelia first met.

He dropped to his knees and set her body aside and began clawing his way through the moist dirt. His anticipation fueled him. *She's waiting for me.* The icky, physical muck embedded under his nails as he tore at the ground. The first beads of sweat to grace his brow since before he could remember dripped into the contorted hole.

When he was done, his breath heavy with the exhaustion of a human male, he lifted her frail, broken corpse and placed her into the shallow grave. Seraph kissed her wrists.

*The ring I gave her.* He glowered at the tiny band.

Spinning the circlet on her finger, he felt the comfort of his lantern even from worlds away. He lifted his gaze to the pale, rosy glen and the gnarled shadows of the branches.

He left it with her body, not for her, but for the tree.

Ophelia felt odd.

An endless mist stretched out before her, and she knew that it should be frightening, but instead a deep sense of comfort and contentment filled her. She was lying on a misty, silver-dusted floor that cooled her skin. *Where am I?*

Her hair fell forward as she looked down at herself. *No more pain.* She stretched and tensed her muscles, testing their endurance. The constant weakness that had become a part of her was mercifully absent. Ophelia strained her arms and lifted herself off the shimmering ground. *No more cracks in my nails.* Her hands rounded into tight fists, knowing her grip would be strong.

*I feel good.* A smile lifted her moist lips.

She sat up on her knees and ran her hands over her satiny skin. Her body was devoid of clothing but her nudity didn't bother her. Her eyes drifted closed in bliss as the silky strands of her hair shifted over her shoulders and back, caressing her like breathy whispers. *Like Seraph's whispers.*

*Where is he?* She frowned, running the smooth, uncalled pads of her fingers over her healed skin. The light was dim around her and she could barely see beyond

her immediate form into the endless dark. As her thoughts turned from her perfectly healed shell, she realized a gaping hollow hole within her heart had grown.

Her nails bit into her chest as she willed her chaotic emotions back in place, she gasped and sucked in the cool dark mist to fill her up. Her worry pierced the skin over her heart and she drew her shivering hand away to glimpse a drop of blood on the tip of her finger.

Ophelia watched in curiosity as it bubbled into a perfect sphere and lifted away from her to ascend like an opaque ruby into the air. It disappeared shortly after, out of her sight.

Her arms came down to wrap around her bare form and she took comfort in the slither of the tether she had on Allie. She focused all of her will on the normality of her friend, hugging the small connection within her empty heart. *I can almost sense her.*

*She survived.*

And then she felt him.

Ophelia gasped as all of her missing *self* poured back into her in rapturous, powerful, and even excruciatingly painful waves. His power over her was a thousand times stronger than her hold on her friend, and she grasped it like a lifeline. The misty ether was caught in her throat.

"Welcome home," Seraph's husky voice ran over her in delicious waves, "Ophelia."

The darkness fell away from at his words and was replaced with a beautiful silvery-blue glow. She looked up for his floating lantern but it wasn't there.

It was then, as she reached her hand out, that hundreds of glowing sapphires appeared on her skin, embedding into her like tiny, glittering stars. She stretched out her limbs and the light from each jewel caught the glow of the others until her body became a shimmering star-field.

Her hair fell forward as she inspected her body in mesmerized fascination. Silvery memory strands braided

themselves into her hair, decorated with cerulean and lapis blue nebulas that swirled around her like a crown.

Ophelia laughed. "You made me a Collector of Stars!" The light of her jewels twinkled off her skin, bright enough, and far enough, to find Seraph sitting in the dark on his petrified wooden throne.

She caught his heated gaze. His body hunched forward, watching her with hunger, as his elbows rested on his parted knees. Her mouth pursed with a want that rivaled his.

*I need you.* An uncomfortable, empty ache thrummed between her naked legs. The need was painful and demanding. *He's inside me already.* And the thought made her moan.

"Crawl to me." The deep authority of his voice glistened her sex. Ophelia kept his demonic eyes as she closed the space between them with a sensual, yearning slowness that she didn't know she possessed. *Anything for you, Shadow.*

When she kneeled at his feet, between his parted legs, his chilled body encompassed her. "I love you." She said, reverently.

"Kiss me," he demanded.

Ophelia rounded her hands behind his calves as his darkness lifted from the light of her jewels. She slowly ran her fingers up his taut, wiry legs until her palms found his parted knees. Seraph leaned back in restrained silence as she moved up into him.

Her eyes hooded and she licked her silken lips, encouraged by the ticking in his jaw. His hands gripped the bleak, wooden handles of his eternal seat with anticipation. She placed her palms over his and massaged the tense sinew of his skeletal tendons.

A smile graced her lips when he released his fingers from their hold and relinquished them to her.

"I love your hands." She sighed and leaned forward to whisper her mouth over one, a hairsbreadth from touching

his skin with her lips. Seraph grasped her around her neck, encouraging her to make contact. She giggled softly. *No.*

"Yes." His hold tightened on her and she locked her eyes with his devilish ones.

"No." And she breathed her mouth up his arm, keeping his hand captured with hers. Ophelia slithered over him and straddled his thighs, taking in the intoxicating scent of his arousal; the hue of indigo blue washed over his powerful muscles.

Seraph jostled beneath her, widening his legs, forcing her thighs to spread and dropping her naked heat onto his lap. His erection probed between them like a barely contained promise. She moved her hips and glided over his steel shaft, blanketing him in her dewy essence. The musk perfumed the air.

Ophelia burrowed her nose into the crook of his neck while she brought her hand up to pull back his dark, shoulder-length hair. Seraph's hand stiffened on her neck.

"Ophelia, kiss me. *Now.*"

She leaned forward and ran her tongue up his cheek. She grinned wickedly as his head fell back with an anguished groan.

"You taste like dust and frustration."

The next moment his hands clasped her waist and ground her hard against his burning shaft. Her soft laughs turned into soft moans to match his desperation.

She burned.

"Ophelia," her name a curse, his voice strained as they ground against each other. "Give me what I want."

"I have eternity to give into your demands, Seraph," she rasped. "Earn them."

She was answered with a gratingly loud sigh. A moment later he lifted her up and positioned his large cock and thrust up into her as he brought her aching heat to meet him. Her nails dug into her shoulders as she held on, willing her sheath to take in his girth, feeling obscenely stretched.

Seraph moved her hard and fast, stoking a dark, electric desire between them, violently releasing his control and giving it to her. Ophelia razed his ghostly, rigid skin with her nails as she leaned back and took her release from him.

Hard. Quick. Desperate.

She felt him buck and pitch in her, stilling his furious thrusting with his climax. Seraph's hands locked her in place. Their bodies glistened with stress-sweat and sexual ruin. The sparkles of her stars streaked outward and over them, wavering in the damp glare of their skin.

With a sated smile, Ophelia leaned forward kissed the tip of his nose.

Seraph grabbed the back of her head, threading his fingers through her plaited hair and ravaged her mouth. She undulated into him until he stole the mist from her lungs.

Peeling away at tortuously slow intervals, consuming each other leisurely, she pulled back and laid into his hard chest. *His quiet heartbeat is now mine. His heart is beating?* Ophelia smiled lazily as he continued to pet her back, up and down her spine with the tips of his fingers, and kissing the top of her head.

"Your heart is beating." She nuzzled his chest. "It's never done that before."

"That's because you were never there to fill it." He shifted her away as he touched the muscular skin over it. She watched as a beautiful blush soul was pulled forth with swirls of lunar grey mixed throughout. "It's where I keep it safe."

Ophelia's mouth parted as she touched her spirit, instantly feeling the magnetized connection at her tips. "It feels like home."

Seraph twirled it in his fingers before he placed it back in his chest. Ophelia leaned forward and kissed him where it gave him life and leaned back into his embrace.



She sighed happily, "Is there a night-time here? And if so, is there a bed as well...that's mine? Or have I been tricked?"

"So many questions." Seraph tugged her hair. "There is a bed and it's ours. And it is always eventide here, your skin is the night-sky." His hands fell back to her hips. "Do you like your throne?"

"My throne?" She asked as he thrust up into her. *Oh.* "Yes." Laughing.

Ophelia sat back and faced him, his unruly hair plastered to his face, the dark locks a cobalt shade against his spectral skin. They shared a grin.

Seraph caught her hand between them. "I'm sorry." She looked at her fingers caged within his.

"Why?"

"I promised I would be there at the end."

Her face darkened. "You were where you needed to be." Ophelia paused. "She survived. I called her when I first awoke but the link? It was frail."

"She's alive and it's because she's linked to both of us. You could not have collected her soul otherwise."

"Are her memories gone?" Ophelia tensed for the answer.

"Yes. And every memory of me."

"Did... any of the others?" She felt her muscles relax and her body settle into Seraph's shadows.

He squeezed her hand. "No."

Her face fell. "W-will they be here?" He let go of her hand and cradled her against him.

"They may but they were Trentian, they may have gone elsewhere." She could feel his lips find her hairline again.

Ophelia bit her lip. "Is it evil of me that I don't really care?"

"No, it's not. And you do care, you care more than you know. You had me turn back time for them. You bargained your life to give them a chance—"

“—And they died anyway.”

“It can be a beautiful adventure.”

They sat there in silence for a time. She lulled into a wearied awareness as his hands traced her form. The shimmer of her skin died down to a dusky glow. Her thoughts wandered and her grief ebbed as a strange, lilting lullaby filled her head. An airy song sat on the edge of her mind.

---

Seraph was content. *I have someone to share every moment with from here on after.* He held Ophelia's body like he held her soul over his heart. He could hear the sweet song of paradise overlay the screech of the Great Below.

He felt her lips lift into a beautiful smile over his chest. She whispered against him, “You know how you told me you would follow me into paradise?”

“Yes.”

“I would follow you into the abyss.”

*I know you would.* “That is why I shattered my soul and dressed you in its jewels.” *You damned me and made me live again.* “I am done with you being taken away from me by beauty.” He laughed.

She lifted away again and caught his eyes. Her face dreamy and peaceful. “I'll protect you.”

“Yes, you will. I'm not a good man.” He breathed, “I need you to know that.”

“But you're not a man.” Ophelia graced him with another beautiful smile. His breath caught in his lungs as she radiated happiness, directing it at him, but then her smile turned wicked. And he felt a bargain coming on. “Answer me a question? For a dream?” her voice laced with giddy intrigue.

"A dream?" *What kind of dream?* "Can I lie? I may lie."

She shook her head.

"What's the question? And then we'll define the terms." *I may lie anyway.*

"What did I sell my soul for?"

Seraph grinned. His teeth sharpened. His eyes flashed with sinister glee. *I have been waiting for you to ask, sweet Ophelia.*

"You sold your soul to kiss me."

He leaned forward and captured her mouth in a not-so-chaste kiss.

## EPILOGUE

*S*ometime sooner or later.  
*In a place where time doesn't exist.*  
*Very close, and yet very far away .*

“ *R*oger that—”  
*Fucking Soul Collectors .*

A giant beast of a serpent slithered and swayed before him. The creature twitched and hissed as Lysander stepped through the oily Black Gates, as if his presence was not welcomed. *Well, I am at the entrance to Hell.*

He cocked the heavy-metal pyrizian rail-cannon that was attached to his back. The perfected metalloid barrel extended like a second appendage down the length of his armored suit.

Lysander eyed the monster with one-part boredom, one-part annoyance, and two-parts desperation. *Maybe this place will get me out of the mists.* He huffed. *Going deeper typically means Getting Deeper.* But his calculations were off now that he didn't have *time* as a variable.

The giant, grotesque serpent coiled over and into itself but kept its gaze trained on him. The behemoth twitched and creaked with each sway, the wet keratin of its skin appearing raw and chapped between each flaky scale.

*It's molting.* He noticed then the dead, cloudy skin around the periphery of their arena.

Ripped and broken fins lined its 'back,' torn and frayed by age and unrestrained power. *It has no eyes.* Lysander followed the creature's rocking head with his gun, keeping his target locked. Where the eyes should have been was now only necrotic, dead holes. They sagged outward over its toothy, pointed upper jaw.

Wet, sludgy mucus leaked from its open mouth. He could smell the reek of stagnant water and rotting fish waft through the air. The stench worsened the more the monster moved.

*Its belly is bloated. Pregnant?* He shook himself with revulsion just as the fangs of the beast ran over the cavernous, rocky ground, slicing the stone like a sharp sword swinging through the air. *Don't get near its teeth.* Lysander activated his anti-gravity fields.

He aimed his barrel at the giant snake's face just as countless tiny white orbs surrounded them from all sides. They were the only part that could be seen of their audience's bodies, the dead white dots of their eyes. The serpent reared back with a hissing wail, its jaws extended wide.

*It thinks it can swallow me whole.*

The soft caress of his lucky rock, tied by a frayed rope around his neck, kissed him with good-fortune.

Just before the monster's mouth came down and his weapon triggered, a rapturous, ear-shattering crack vibrated through the endless rocky cavern. The thousands of eerie white eyes and the gateway serpent went still. *What the nexus?* A whoosh sounded in the empty space as the attention shifted from him—the intruder—to the Gate that had reappeared behind him.

Lysander looked with just a glance, unwilling to take his eyes off his opponent for more than a microsecond. He

smirked. *But there's no time here.* And saw what had caused the glass-shattering sounds.

A huge, jagged tear ripped open the sky. Beyond the Gates of the Great Below and so far in the distance of the ether that it appeared an eternity away. *FREEDOM.*

*Time to finish this.*

Lysander shifted his aim from the beast's distracted face to its belly and started charging the capacitors of his rail-cannon. He felt the concentrated magnetic force build up within his steel suit, the power exhausting and invigorating him at the same time. The static tugged at his hair even within the protection of his metal cage.

The grated sand beneath his feet swirled around his legs. The eyes of the spectators shifted back toward him but it was too late.

The blast was as bright as a supernova and for just a brief moment, the darkness of Hell vanished and was replaced with a powerful blaze.

When he lowered his arm and allowed his cannon to interlock back into his metal framework, the gateway serpent was zombie-washed and grey with second-death.

Lysander turned back to leave and stopped short. The crack in the sky that led back to his realm had sealed shut.

*What. The. Fuck.*

That was last time he would be able to use his nova. The suit, *his* second skin, was dying around him. *And I don't have a soul.*

---

Seraph twitched. *Someone is approaching.*

He lifted away from the petrified desk where Ophelia was fashioning her own lantern. She had been working on it relentlessly since accustoming herself to the buffer. The sparkles of his anima a permanent fixation on her skin

produced enough light that she would never have to face the darkness alone, but she liked the thought of having her own floating aura to follow them around.

Seraph spent his time watching her spin ribbons of glass between her fingertips. He would add his own touches at the end.

With a brief glance at her pensive face, he left to greet the entity that stood before the door to his domain.

The metal man, Lysander, walked toward him from out of the ether's impenetrable mists. He was dragging a giant behemoth of a corpse behind him. The serpent from the black throat of the Great Below. Seraph could not see where the snake ended.

Lysander, the giant soulless robot, came to a stop with an audible grunt, the mists lit up with neon LEDS.

"You still don't have a soul." Seraph smirked as the robot looked at him with hard, narrowed, inhuman eyes.

"Will you consider the beast that would have eaten you if you had entered the depthless gates?"

Seraph cocked his head and looked beyond at the creature that laid out in front of him. He had never seen anything of the like in all his years within the ether. And he had seen nightmares. He cringed at the bloated corpse.

*A dead being where the dead thrive.* The concept was unnerving.

He walked down the flank of the snake, to gauge its length, but it appeared to never end. Lysander's heavy steps followed behind him. The ghoulish corpse continued on and into the ether, forever.

Seraph pulled his spears to him as the belly, which he *thought* was distended with the gases of decay, began to move. He heard the machine-man detach a metal rod.

"Something is moving inside it. What do you think that is?" Seraph inquired warily. *This thing is too close to Ophelia.*

"I think it may be pregnant." They shared a look. Lysander's weapon grew outward as the metal baton overlaid each new piece.

"Life cannot be created here." Seraph stared at the very dead, possibly very pregnant serpent.

"My scans sense nothing." A subdued but vibrant flash of light dotted each end. They moved in unison and Seraph swung his spear over the withered flesh, slicing it open.

They stepped back, weapons raised as the innards bubbled up and out of the gash. It dropped down with a plop, the reek of rotting fish strong enough to kill.

Seraph called the darkness to him in anger. "What did you bring me?" he hissed. His cerulean light flashed from his hands to the tips of his sweet-sharp spears.

"A trophy?"

The gash stretched before their eyes as a rocking vibration shook the serpent corpse. It wasn't baby snakes that spewed out but the font of a billion trapped souls tearing their way to freedom.

Their disgust turned to awe as they spilled out in droves, flooding the space around them like endless, riotous waves. Every inch of him was consumed in the fleeing sparkles. The sight was beyond brilliant.

Lysander turned to him when the waves thinned enough that they could see each other again. "Well? There's roughly a billion."

"No." Seraph captured his spears back within. "I can't do anything with Hell's trash." The metal man sighed, replacing his metal rod into his armor. Seraph looked at the robot with something close to pity. "Lysander, look for the aliens. They may save you."

Lysander bellowed in laughter. "Not after what I've done to them."

He watched as the machine grabbed hold of the giant corpse and began to drag it away.

They never saw each other again.



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading my second book. It was an interesting journey for me to undertake, and I got a chance to explore several areas that hold my attention with intrigue. This book takes place roughly eight years before book one. I'm sorry if this causes any confusion; it's just how the story worked in my mind. If you enjoyed it, please leave me an honest review on Amazon or Goodreads. You can reach me at my Facebook page [NaomiLucasRomance](#) for updates and announcements on future installments.

Or join my [newsletter](#) for the same information!

The real ending of Ophelia and Seraph:

I look at my phone with trepidation. The next step will be the hardest but I just have to do it. I just have to call him. Feeling the dew of sweat on my brow and the tremble in my lip, I grab the damning device.

With a heavy sigh, I dial his number.

He answers, his voice filled with annoyance. "What?" Gah, he sounds so hot.

"Hi, Seraph." I squeak.

"You're running out of things to bargain with, Naomi." His frustration is evident. I can hear Ophelia murmur in the background.

"Please tell Ophelia I'm sorry."

A short pause follows before he responds. "Why...?"

"I-I'm breaking up with you! I'm sorry but it has to be this way!"

"What th—" I click off the phone just before his curses fill my ear. I set the phone down next to me with a sad sigh. It buzzes and pings. It vibrates and flashes. But I don't answer it.

Eventually it stops.

I'm glad that's over. Rubbing my hands together, I open a crisp, new word document.

And start a new relationship.

*-Naomi Lucas*

**ALSO BY NAOMI LUCAS**

**Stranded in the Stars**

Last Call

Collector of Souls

Star Navigator

**Cyborg Shifters**

Wild Blood

Storm Surge

Shark Bite

Mutt

Ashes and Metal

Chaos Croc

Ursa Major

Dark Hysteria (Coming 2021)

**The Bestial Tribe**

Minotaur: Blooded

Minotaur: Prayer

**Venys Needs Men**

To Touch a Dragon

To Mate a Dragon

To Wake a Dragon

**Valos of Sonhadra**

Radian t

**Standalones**

Six Months with Cerberus